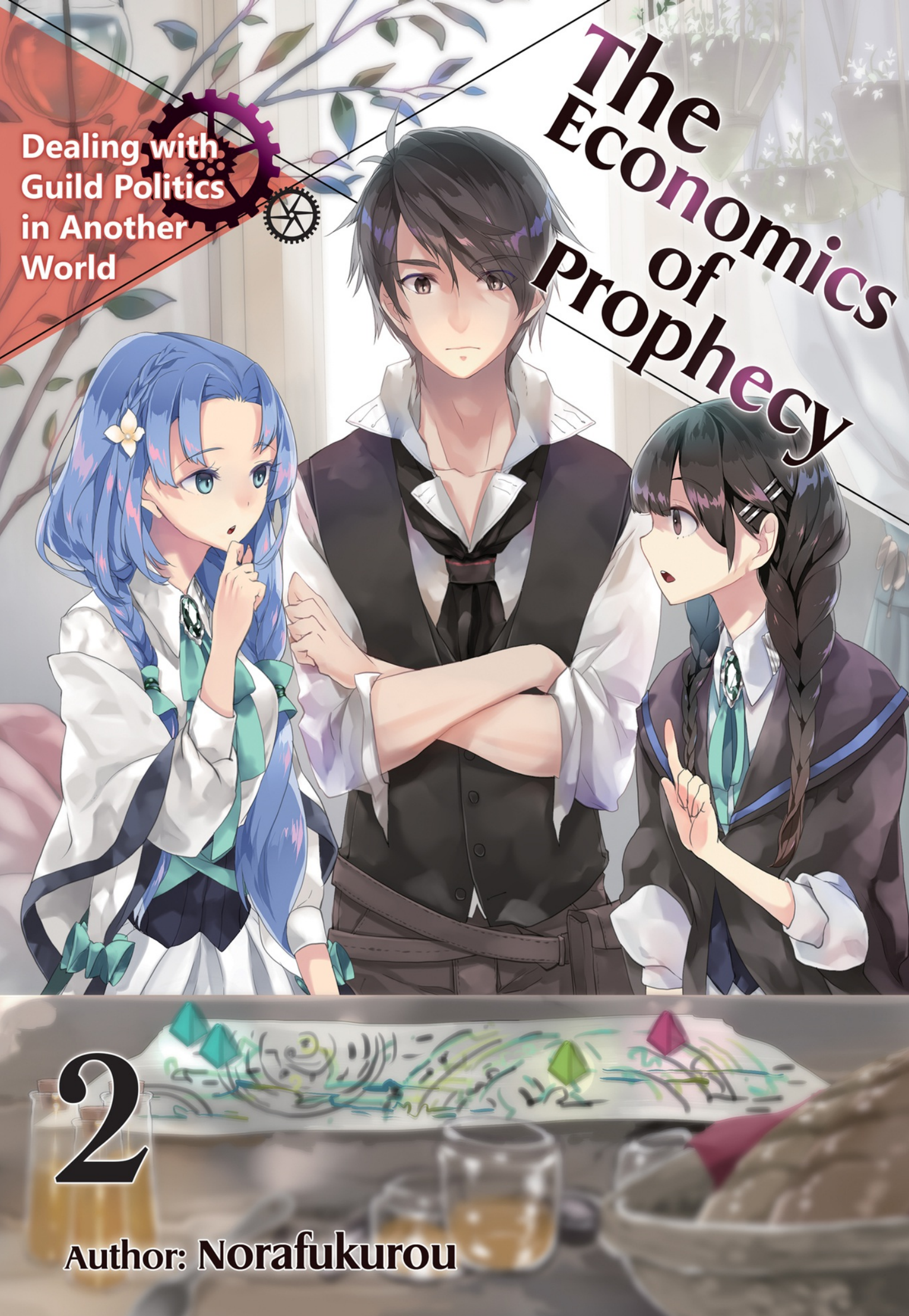




Dealing with
Guild Politics
in Another
World

The Economics of Prophecy

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Prologue

The wooden desk before him was stained with black marks. There were traces of ink going all the way back to his grandfather's era from writing letters to trade partners. The middle-aged man had both his hands placed atop that desk soaked in the company's history.

Under his eyes were two sealed letters, about as white as fine quality flour, placed together side by side. The signatures of the senders completely contrasted with each other. The one on the right had thick and rough handwriting; a puddle of ink sent sprawling across the paper could be seen on the very last letter. On the other hand, the one on the left was soft and thin with a steady flow. Both signatures had the title of Deputy Representative written beneath them, and bore the crest of the same guild they were both affiliated to.

With sweat on his brow, the man looked from one letter to the other with bloodshot eyes.

“The Carlests of the east, or the Kendalls of the west...”

Putting it simply, he was left with the choice of which one to endorse to become the proper representative. As a silver company of significant influence affiliated to the Culinary Guild, his choice would have a considerable effect on the entire guild.

Thinking of it normally, the east would be the only choice. The Carlest Company was twenty percent larger, and if pushed to say, had a closer relationship to that other company. On the other hand, the Kendall Company was the hateful enemy who crushed his parent company, the once firm representative of the guild, the Dreyfan Company. They could even be said to be the primary culprit behind this troublesome decision.

The man stretched out his right hand. However, his hand stopped before reaching the letter with rough handwriting.

“No, the problem isn't our relations up until now, it's the ones we'll have from now on...”

The Carlests were putting fairly severe pressure on the companies under their umbrella. He had heard of copper companies being dismantled and incorporated into silver companies under the Carlests' direct influence. Obviously enough, he didn't hear of any silver companies, regular members of the guild, meeting this fate. But how would things go if they gained the status of guild representative?

The man stretched out his left hand. However, the owner of the flowing and light handwriting was far too unreliable. The Kendall company dealt in flour, and due to the abundant harvests from recent years, the market was glutted.

The importance of foreign export of foodstuffs to the Empire was steadily growing. To this man's company, who accepted the framework of the exports under the former guild representative, losing such business would be a matter of life or death.

And if he left the decision to the royal palace...

"If Second Prince Delnicious succeeds the crown prince, it'll be the east. Archduke Kurtheight would become his father-in-law. Carlest's influence in the royal palace would be flawless. However, having the guild under his thumb using that power..."

In the end, both the man's hands remained immobile atop his table.

"...There's still a little time until my selection has to be made. It's not necessarily determined that Prince Delnicious will become the crown prince. There's also talk of Third Prince Craig gaining popularity."

And just as the man grabbed the two letters to stow them both away in his drawer, he suddenly heard loud clattering and a bang from the back of his shop, bringing him to a stop. This was followed by an uproar of voices from the employees working downstairs.

"Wh-What's going on?"

The man ran to the back door, and found one of his company's wagons turned upside down with its wheels in the air. The bags that fell to the ground were overflowing with smooth white flour, his company's prided high-class goods which had been threshed over and over. A large number of footprints

could be seen all across that white layer, as if it had been trampled on.

“Pops!”

His son came running over to him. Taking a closer look at him, his cheek was swollen.

“A band of hoodlums were blocking the road and suddenly flipped the goddamn wagon. The leader was a guy with a scar on his right arm, probably some has-been soldier. He scampered off that way.”

The man was far less worried about his son yelling about getting some payback than he was about his merchandise. Such fine quality flour wasn’t easy to acquire. Even if they had excess wheat, it wasn’t simple to increase the volume of equipment like the millstones needed to grind it down so finely.

Moreover, these goods were destined for his most important customer. It was an order by the archduke meant to match an important announcement during the upcoming summer.

“What were the guards doing?”

The man looked around the area. Public order in the Kingdom was fundamentally satisfactory. After the rebellion, the military saw a reduction of personnel organized by the prime minister. The excess soldiers were then used to increase the number of local guards all around. The royal capital, especially in urban areas where silver companies gathered, was considered a safe region.

“They’re only starting to show their asses now. The hell do they think we’re paying these stupid high taxes for?” His son grumbled.

Taking a look down the road, he could see two men wearing green uniforms running his way carrying long batons in their hands.

A certain doubt came across his mind. The expenses for the guards was allotted to each region of the city. They were a military service compensated with money. In other words, this man’s company was an important financial supporter of theirs. The commotion at the back door was loud enough that he could easily hear it from his second-floor room on the opposite side of the building.

Furthermore, the guards came from the exact direction the ruffians were said to run off to. Upon seeing their leisurely pace, an answer to said doubts came to him. The guilds acted as agents to collect the taxes from each district. Therefore...

“So that’s how it is...”

The man squeezed down on one of the letters that were still in his hands, and the other white letter fell to the ground.

Chapter 1: The Daughter of a Silver Company

"It's finally over!"

Sitting in the classroom as our last lecture came to an end, I stretched both my arms out as much as I could. The feeling of all the numbers they were cramming in my head now tumbling out felt great. *With this, I'm free from numerology until the summer break ends.*

I'm just a little bad at numerology. As the daughter of a mercantile house, I can at least do the minimum required calculations. But the lectures at this academy have a bunch of stuff in there that doesn't have any sort of practical application to us. Things like the area of a circle won't help us do business, right?

Apparently it's got something to do with wizardry. But that's got nothing to do with normal commoners without any sort of disposition for that stuff. After making a bunch of excuses in my head, I noticed people were staring at me and lowered my arms in a fluster.

Oops, that's no good. My behavior here in the Academy is directly connected to my house, the Torito Company, and thus also affects our parent company, the Kendall Company. I need to be especially careful during important times like this.

I readjusted my hair, tied up to the side by my favorite barrette, and called out to the girl with black braids sitting in front of me, my best friend.

"Mia. What're you doing after school?"

"I have plans in the library."

Her braids had grown a little longer as of late, and they swayed in the air as she turned her slightly childish face (for her age, at least) towards me. As always, she replied briefly and to the point with half-closed eyes.

The notebook in front of her clearly had far more complex lines of numbers in it than what the lecture covered. I quickly averted my gaze from the numbers that were surely trying to squeeze their way back into my head.

“That so? It’s nice and sunny out, so I kinda wanted to go to the courtyard with you. I feel like it’s gonna be a good day for me.”

“You say that every day, Lilka. It has no statistical meaning that way.”

“That’s not true. Today’s special. I passed by Miss Louisa in the hallway during lunch, and she even smiled back at me when I bowed.”

Miss Louisa was a girl with chestnut hair tied up in an elegant manner. Just thinking of her graceful and dignified little face had me entranced.

“...I don’t think anything good will come out of getting involved with a noble lady, though.”

“There you go saying things like Weinder again... To us, the connections we manage to make here will decide our futures, you know? Well, yeah, I guess she’s technically the heir of a viscount until she finds a husband. And I guess she’s also recently been appointed as an advisor to Her Highness the Princess and is kinda out of reach. Oh, but you know? The way she’s burdened with such heavy responsibilities despite being a girl is also rather lovely. Actually, compared to a certain unreliable princess...”

After going that far, I noticed my friend’s face had stiffened up.

“Oh, that’s not what I mean. I’m not insulting her. Uhh, she just seems kinda dangerous, you know? Come on, like when she cut into the middle of Dreyfan and Weinder’s fight. Weren’t you also quite wary of her ’cause of that, Mia?”

I hushed my voice. Compared to such a capable woman as Miss Louisa, there was something about Princess Alfina that just made you anxious. She was quite beautiful, though, and seemed very kind too.

Well, as a mere daughter of a silver company, there’s pretty much no chance that I’d ever get involved with her anyway.

“I mean, she’s the savior of the village I was born in,” Mia said.

“That thing with the prophecy, huh? I was really shocked when she suddenly brought it up during the Spring Festival. And she was spot on, too... But you know? Wasn’t it through Prince Craig’s great efforts and the work of Sage Fulsig that the monsters were actually suppressed?”

“I see... So that’s how it turned out...”

“What do you mean, ‘that’s how?’ How else would it turn out? Well, whatever. You need to gather information like this too, alright? I mean, we don’t know how our futures are gonna turn out.”

Epecially for a copper company. Though I stopped myself from saying that aloud.

“I’m grateful for all the information you always provide me, Lilka.”

“Huh? Mm. I’m having you teach me about numerology too anyway.”

“But in my case, my future and workplace have already been decided.”

Her black eyes didn’t usually show much emotion, but they were now filled with a faint sense of vigor. And even though I knew I was just butting in, I went and opened my big mouth anyway.

“You mean the Weinder Company? I don’t really want to say this, but I think you’re wasted on them. Like, the Great Sage called you the other day and talked with you about numerology, right?”

In my opinion, this girl possessed tremendous talent. Even the Great Sage, who perfectly predicted the monster flood in the west, seemingly came to talk with Mia about numerology full of enthusiasm. Not that I could follow any of what they were saying, but it looked like Mia was the one teaching him.

“...Ricardo is far more outrageous...”

“Huh? You say something? Hey, I don’t really mean to criticize the size of your company... I mean, I do think President Weinder has a discerning eye for sending you to the Academy... But the all-important heir to the Weinders is kinda, you know...”

The face of a certain male student with the same black hair as Mia and his completely unmotivated expression came to mind. He only came out for the bare minimum number of lectures, and confined himself in the library after school pretty much all the time. He was actually in attendance today, but had been off for the last few days.

Yeah, during this season, of all times. Even though the most important event

for the mercantile students happens during the summer break. I'd really love to ask him why he's even attending the Academy. But above all else was his reckless behavior.

"Just the fact that he defied Dreyfan makes him insane."

It was a fatal flaw for a copper company to lack a sense of self-preservation. Even if he just reaped what he sowed, what would happen if it put Mia in danger? It was even dangerous for the Kendalls, a gold company ranked third within the guild.

God, just remembering it pisses me off.

The provision of supplies to the chivalric order was my parent company's turf, and the Dreyfans tried to take it over using backdoor connections. In the end, the Kendalls managed to desperately fight them off. Both me and Shirley also put our all into cooperating. As a result, the Dreyfans were crushed. We'd been super busy because of that, so the Academy Festival this year would turn out to be even more tense than last year's was.

Incidentally, even though the Dreyfans were staring that guy down, they ended up paying for what they did, and he managed to get off scot-free without doing anything. From what I'd heard, the business he had that Dreyfan had been suppressing was now in the middle of a great expansion.

I don't really mean to demand gratitude from him or anything, but he kinda got saved by us, right?

"Weinder's not even putting up a shop for the Academy Festival, right?"

"We don't have the leisure for such a thing."

Mia replied immediately. *I guess it's true that it'd be kinda tight for a copper to fund one. I'm still astounded by how unmotivated that guy is, though. I heard he sells second-rate honey with a poor color to it, but isn't this the best chance there is to peddle his goods?*

Whatever. Who cares about that unmotivated jerk? The important thing here is Mia.

The two of us got up from our seats, and after leaving the classroom, we both

headed towards the library. I turned around and stared at Mia as we walked.

“Hey, there’s something I wanted to bring up with you. So, about summer break. Do you maybe... wanna try helping out at our place? There was quite a bit of fuss with the Dreyfans and all, so the upcoming Academy festival is kinda important. Your numerology skills would be super helpful, Mia.”

I’m not thinking of snatching her away or anything. All I’m doing is offering the opportunity to gain some valuable experience to the Weinder Company’s employee, Mia. I mean, what if something were to happen to Weinder? Isn’t it obviously way better to have connections with another company?

“I can also introduce you to—”

And as we turned the corner, in the middle of me trying to say something...

“Oh, Mia. Good day to you.”

A schoolgirl walked down the corridor towards us and called out to Mia. *Huh? Isn’t this voice...?!*

“Good day, Miss Morland.”

It was none other than Miss Louisa. Mia replied in her usual curt tone. *Why? Isn’t this an amazing chance? Why is this happening? Wait, that’s not important right now. She’s being too blunt. Anybody would notice...*

“U-Um, Miss Louisa. Mia is going over a numerology problem I asked her about. Everything flies out of her head when she starts thinking about numbers.”

“Oh, you’re...”

Miss Louisa finally looked my way.

“Ah, right. I’m a daughter of the Culinary Guild’s silver company, the Toritos. My name is Lilka.”

“Oh my, is this perhaps a friend of yours, Mia?”

Miss Louisa turned to Mia, and she returned a small nod. Miss Louisa then put her hand to her chin and started thinking about something, before pointing a cheerful smile towards me.

“Just what we’re looking for. We’re having a tea party the day after tomorrow. Would you perhaps like to join us, Lilka? Any friend of Mia’s is welcome.”

“...A-A-A-A-A-A tea party?! U-Um! I-I-I-I-It would be an h-h-h-honor!” I unintentionally yelled. *Miss Louisa herself just invited me to a tea party. This isn’t a dream, right?*

“—handle Weinder as well. We need to catch him and make sure he doesn’t run away. The princess is quite worried about his lack of attendance, so—”

“—I know—”

“—derful. Let’s get along as fellow aides—”

And with my mind still in the clouds from such a sudden event, Miss Louisa left us behind. By the time I realized I didn’t say my farewells, she was already quite far away. I felt like I heard Weinder’s name come up there, though...

Oh, it was probably just something like the Weinder Company’s Mia, wasn’t it? Anyways, this is huge. This is my first invitation from a noble. And from a viscount’s family, even.

“Hey, Mia, why didn’t you tell me you were acquainted with Miss Louisa? Oh, is it maybe something to do with the Great Sage?”

Still lingering in my excitement, I turned to my friend and began chatting. As fellow students, it’s not all that strange for nobles to begin speaking to you, and if you’re courageous enough, for you to begin speaking with them. But invitations to a tea party during the high-society open season, which took place twice a week, are particularly special. If invited a second and third time, it means officially receiving their favor.

“...Something like that. Anyways, Lilka, we’re in the library.”

“Oops...”

I covered my mouth with my hands, and the other people in the library stopped glaring at me.

“S-So...”

I hushed my voice. *The first time is extremely important. Furthermore, I’m*

only a tag-along for Mia. If I do anything weird, it'll end up troubling her.

"Um, what should I do to prepare? Gifts are banned the first time, right?"

When it came to formal invitations, the first time was, at most, a trial. That's the rule. Apparently, this was decided on as to not place a burden on the commoner students. *Which reminds me, there were rumors about an impudent commoner boy who attended the princess's tea party without even being invited, and went as far as forcing a gift on her. I just have to avoid making a mistake like that.*

"Just deal with it calmly. There's no other choice."

"Y-You're right. That's all people like us can do, huh?"

I nodded back. She was exactly right. The hostess was a noble daughter of a viscount. *Oh yeah, I can ask Maria for advice. The young miss should have plenty of experience with this stuff.*

"Besides, to be more precise, the host—"

"Ooh, you're here, Mia. I was just looking for you." A sudden hoarse voice cut Mia off.

"It's rare for you to come to the library, Great Sage," I said.

"Haha, I *am* the director here, though. My room is going through a bit of remodeling right now, so I've got nowhere to stay."

"Ricardo is also looking forward to the new laboratory."

"I see, is that so? Well, that's also what I wanted to talk about..."

The old man with a white beard, the Great Sage, nodded with a satisfied look. The two of them immediately began talking about some difficult to understand numerology. He was the one who contributed greatly to averting the recent disaster, and also the royal princess's teacher in matters related to wizardry. *In other words, he's the one linking Mia together with the princess's aide, Miss Louisa? I don't really get how those connections fit together. I'm sure this is just another boon of Mia's talent and efforts. That guy really should learn a thing or two from her.*

"...By changing the scale of the time axis, it's possible to intuitively handle a

larger range of numbers...”

“...So we’re not just changing the scale of both axes, we’re changing the ratio between them...? Mm, that does stand to reason... Though it’s a little strange for you to be telling that to a sage, Mia. Whatever. That settles one of the difficult problems. All that’s left is to actually get the numbers out... Tell that youngster to hurry up and let me know about that thing he mentioned last time.”

The Great Sage left in great humor. Mia really was amazing. But who was the youngster he mentioned, anyway? Come to think of it, there were rumors about Weinder helping the Great Sage too. Apparently, there was some twig or weed or something the Great Sage needed, and Weinder just happened to pick it up near his village. Anyone could do that.

Seriously, why are both him and Mia so lucky?

Chapter 2: Mana Measurement

“So you’re saying we should consider the possibility of it happening again, right?” The old man with a long white beard and fishhook-like eyebrows said. His wrinkled eyes had a sense of indiscretion to them. Thanks to that, it felt like he was up to some sort of no good trick.

“It’s obviously better that it doesn’t happen again. However, if we don’t assume it will, then we won’t make it in time at the critical moment,” I replied.

Well, that part of him actually makes him somewhat more reliable. After school, although quite close to the evening, I was talking with Fulsig in the director’s office.

“So, what do we do first?” His bony fingers, steeped in a suspicious paint, were moving about in the air as if grasping at something.

“First, we consolidate the problem. At any rate, we’re fundamentally lacking in information.”

The future is always unknown. That’s exactly why we decide on priorities among the resources we currently possess, bear the risk, and take action. It’s the same for any problem. However, mana is a type of physical law which can’t be found in the world where I acquired most of my knowledge. Quell’s Crystal is also capable of seeing into the future. It’s like they’re trying to pick a fight with my policy.

I do think there’s some sort of reasoning and secret behind how the prophecies work. But right now, I’m not able to imagine what that is at all. Even if I searched for records in the past, the role of the Oracle Princess has been nothing but a farce for quite some years. I won’t be able to tell which ones are real or fake. If forced to guess, about all I can say is the crystal uses mana to bring forth some sort of information. But from where?

“Considering the last prophecy, a large change in the flow of ley lines, meaning a large fluctuation in mana, occurred before the prophecy could be seen. Is it suitable to assume so?” I asked.

“Hmm. It’s likely suitable for now. The first fluctuation in mana which triggers a monster flood begins three years before the flood itself. It comes before the prophecy.”

“Back during the last monster flood in the east, Princess Alfina was not yet the Oracle Princess. Was there any reaction from the crystal?”

“I looked into that, but I can’t say for sure. Apparently, there wasn’t.”

The crystal showed omens before the prophecies. This occurred even when Alfina wasn’t around. In other words, the prophecies were being produced even if the position of Oracle wasn’t being filled. In that case...

“Humans can already predict monster floods in the east, so it doesn’t show up in prophecy.”

“That’s entirely possible.”

Everything became instantly shadier. *Hang on, the definition of information theory is to take the unknown and make it known, right? No, no, stop, that’s way too abstract. I need to think of it more concretely. Meaning...*

“We really should be investigating and observing records of ley line activity in more detail. Is that the best we can do at this point?”

From an economic standpoint, it’s like grasping the flow of money. It’s so indirect. However, in this moment where the prophecy has yet to come, you could say that this is the best time for us to harden our foundations.

“You really do always say things that put this old wizard to shame. But it’s not that simple. Using the concept of logarithms that Mia taught me, we managed to go back another ten years in analyzing the records of mana activity from annual tree rings. But that’s the limit if we don’t increase the precision of the numbers we’re basing all these calculations on.”

Taking a closer look, there were logarithmic graphs affixed to the slate board. The graphs that were curved lines the last time I saw them were now straight lines.

“The precision and sensitivity of measurements are the foundation of everything, after all. So should our more concrete objective be the

development of an even better method of measuring mana?” Fulsig asked.

Despite technically being the foremost expert on mana measurement in the Kingdom, this old man was willing to lend an ear to a girl young enough to be his grand-, or great-granddaughter. That was one of his merits.

“I’d like to confirm something about the fundamentals of mana. Mana and normal substances do not typically interact, meaning mana practically passes right through them. Mana can flow through a metal known as brightsilver. And there are particular substances which specifically interact with mana. Those are the three fundamentals, right?”

I looked at the evening sun out the window. The reason the setting sun is red is because the light from the sun is scattered by wavelength as it passes through the atmosphere until the red band is the only one remaining upon reaching us. In other words, light and the atmosphere interact. If say, the sun emitted mana instead of light, then the color perceived during the day and during dusk should be exactly the same. Actually, it should still be bright as day even during the night when the entire planet is obscuring it. It somewhat reminds me one way or another of neutrinos in the other world. They were on the news multiple times in Japan due to a local Nobel Prize winner.

“You’ve got the gist of it right. For example, this substance painted on my manameter paper is a mana catalyst which specifically interacts with mana.”

“Meaning, it’s a catalyst which only reacts to mana by changing color. Let’s say we emit mana from the other side of that wall; this manameter paper will still react, right?”

“Yup. I’ve got just the thing to demonstrate. I only found it again since the room was being remodeled.”

Fulsig pulled a flat box out of his desk. Inside was a small piece of metal like a circular coin. It looked like copper, but the outer circumference was silver.

“I think it was just around this time last year. After transferring here, one of the greenhorns from the Bureau told me that if I’m going to play around, then I might as well lend him a hand. So we managed to supplement this with mana from magicite.”

From what Fulsig told me, it was originally made as a sort of guidepost for the knights. It's apparently something like a beacon which emits mana ever so slowly.

"Hmm. So it still has some."

Fulsig then pulled a bulky book from his shelf and placed it on top of the little coin, and placed a manameter paper on top of the book. When he peeled the paper back, there was a white ring imprinted on it.

"That's amazing. The boundaries aren't even hazy. And that's from a year ago?"

This basically means the mana is continuously flowing in a circle on the circumference of the coin. Mana only reacts under specific conditions. In other words, it's actually quite difficult for it to diffuse. This is practically a superconductor. Not only that, the traces of mana that went through the book and projected onto the manameter paper was nearly a perfect circle.

"It's a little too clean, though. Shouldn't it normally become weaker inversely proportional to the square of the distance?"

"What 'normal' do you mean by 'normally'...? Well, mana does normally follow that trend. In this case, the utilization of a clean color of mana that was drawn from magicite and the circular shape are major factors."

"I see... In any case, umm, there aren't just catalysts capable of showing a response to mana in some way, there are also catalysts capable of obstructing it, right?"

"Mhm. Like the stuff that's painted on the wall of the laboratory next door. There's also technically one capable of reflecting only a specific color of mana. But its effect is fairly limited, and there's not much of it out there."

I see. It seems like there's something I may be able to do with all those conditions. But hang on...

"Can't you just make the magical device you used to measure the annual tree rings bigger?"

"I wouldn't be struggling if that were possible. You saw the circuit on its

surface, right? I can't make the same thing anymore. We know the shape, so an alchemist should be able to make it in theory, but they can't replicate the precision, apparently. Makes you wonder if the alchemists of the Bureau just don't have the same disposition to magicite that they used to. Or maybe there's something else going on..."

Come to think of it, there was a finely detailed pattern which surfaced upon reacting to the mana when he did the measurements. So even though it takes passive measurements, it uses magicite like some sort of amp circuit?

"Can't you reproduce just a single copy?"

"We don't have enough of the high-quality magicite required, the brightsilver to create the circuit, or the materials I need myself, let alone the money."

"We're short on everything then. Umm, brightsilver and magicite are imported from the Empire, right?"

"That's right. Seems monster activity over there is on the rise. Unlike the Kingdom, the Empire does have magicite mines, but those are naturally very close to monster territory too."

"That seems awfully dangerous. A monster flood should never have occurred in the west. Meaning the flow of the ley lines further to the west must be quite chaotic."

I looked at the map next to the slate board. There was a large river bisecting the center of the map into northern and southern sections. The south is the Kingdom. And the northwest is the Empire. The ley lines which triggered the monster flood in the west are located in a mountain range very close to imperial territory. They're separated from it by a river, but there's a possibility that the ley lines are connected deep underground.

"The increase in monster activity in the Empire... and the chaos of the ley lines in the western Kingdom... So there's a possibility the two of them are linked."

Fulsig guessed at what I was thinking by following my gaze. Of course, this was all just a hypothesis at the present time. However, the main point is still the ley lines, so let's keep it in mind. The scale of the problem didn't seem like it

was going to fit in my head at all.

“...The information is clear for now. I’ll need to think it over a little, in as simple a way as possible,” I said with a sigh.

“...So you’re not saying that you can’t do it.”

“I’m also not saying that I can.”

The modern knowledge in my head is built on the shoulders of giants. It may be possible for me to discover something related on a conceptual level. And if I can discover it, I can have this old man test it. You could say I’m relying on others to attain my own objectives in every sense.

“Are you going this far for the princess’s sake?”

“...? I guess so. Frankly, there’s no other choice, since it’ll be dangerous if a second prophecy comes along.”

The next time it won’t just be a disaster. It feels like a political war will get fully underway.

“Hmm. Well, I guess that’s good enough for you youngsters,” Fulsig commented with a broad grin.

What’s youth got to do with this? But... I guess even if you take my cumulative age into account, I’m still under half as old as this man.

Chapter 3: Tea Party

I walked down a corridor connecting the two school buildings, wearing the spare uniform I usually didn't wear, and came to a stop. I turned my attention towards the rectangular courtyard. There was a line of flower beds in the middle, and opposite those was a row of gazebos. Yup, it's the same scene as always.

Oh, my hair... No, I can't worry about it too much. My dad always says, "No matter how much you put your appearance in order, your business partner will always see through your loss in composure."

"Okay!"

I finished arranging my hair, calmed myself down, and started walking once more.

"Oh my, if it isn't Lilka."

"Hello, Zeldia..."

After getting about halfway to the courtyard, an upperclassman coming out of the opposing building called out to me. Oh come on, this is just bad luck.

Zeldia is in the grade above mine, and is the eldest daughter of the Culinary Guild's Carlest Company.

Their primary business region lies in the eastern Kingdom — unlike our parent company, the Kendalls, whose primary business region lies to the west — and they're purveyors to the house of Archduke Kurtheight. They happen to be a somewhat larger company than the Kendalls. Incidentally, they are a deputy representative of the guild, just like the Kendalls.

To sum things up, they're business rivals of the Kendall Company. At present, they have the advantage, too. From what I've heard of their overbearing conduct since the Dreyfans were crushed, just thinking of the Carlests becoming the guild representative sends shivers down my spine.

"What is the daughter of a silver doing out here, I wonder? I, for one, am here to deliver something to Lady Hilda. I received some of her favorite sweets from

one of our child companies, and they'll be using them during the upcoming important student council meeting."

A schoolgirl carrying a basket stood behind Zeldia. Lady Hilda is the eldest daughter of Archduke Kurtheight and fiancée to Second Prince Delnicus. Now that the first prince's health is in a poor state, there's a fairly high possibility that she will become the next queen. Furthermore, she serves as the student council president of the Academy. Excluding a single exception... no, in reality, she may in fact possess the strongest position out of all students in the Academy.

"I'm sure she will grace us with her patronage during the Academy Festival as well. Heehee, there's only a month and a half left; do you have any prospects yourself, I wonder?"

One side of Zeldia's lips twisted upwards as she giggled.

"I just so happen to have been invited to a tea party today."

Zeldia seems to think she's already the daughter of an honorary baron, but we're both still commoners. I can't let her just overpower me so easily.

"Hmm, well, isn't that impressive? Where exactly will you be...?"

"The central gazebo," I answered as I puffed out my chest.

"Wha...? Pffft..."

"Wh-What...?"

"Nothing. I know that you want to put on airs, but it would do you well not to say such arbitrary things."

"I'm not putting on airs..."

"It's okay, it's okay. I'll keep quiet about what you said. Pffft... Ahahaha! How laughable!"

Zeldia held her hand to her mouth as she walked off towards the eastern gazebo. The girl behind her holding the basket also sneered at me before following along. I do understand what she's thinking: the central gazebo is the one of highest status, and is exclusive to the use of the royal princess. On that note, before Princess Alfina enrolled here, it was apparently Lady Hilda who was

using it.

The next largest gazebos were set up to the east and west with a fair distance between them as if to prevent fellow VIPs from bumping into and overhearing each other. The one Zeldia walked off toward was the large gazebo to the east.

Now that I think of it, I've been way too nervous about the tea party and never considered this myself. Why is it happening in the central gazebo...? Oh, I get it, Miss Louisa is the princess's advisor, so she must have been lent its use. She really is amazing.

"Okay, hang in there! I'll get Miss Louisa to come to our booth and... Well, that's probably unreasonable. But let's go in there with at least the intent of inviting her to the Kendalls' dinner."

I clenched my fists as I watched my upperclassman walk off. Today isn't just about me. Zeldia... or the Carlests, are basically in bed with the Archduke of the East. If we're to oppose them, the Kendalls require a connection to the Archduchess of the West. That's what Maria said.

If I'm able to get close to Miss Louisa, it may become a link to said archduchess. When I consulted the young miss about the tea party, that's what she was hoping would come from this.

That's right. This is a battlefield for merchants. I can't just get all happy over having a tea party with the girl I look up to.

"Lilka."

"Hwah...?! M-Mia? Don't scare me like that."

A voice suddenly called me from behind as I took a deep breath in front of the gazebo, making me jump out of my skin.

"Jeez, I wanted to come here together, but you left the classroom right away."

"I had to drop by the library to see Ricardo."

"Weinder again? He's forcing you to run around even at a crucial time like this?"

That man doesn't understand how serious it is to tie relations with the

nobility. Or maybe he's just jealous that his own employee is getting ahead of him...

"Let's go. Keep yourself together, okay?" Mia told me.

"Oh, y-yeah. Of course."

It looks like this situation even has Mia all ready to go. Her usually sleepy eyes were as sharp as mine were when I was glaring at Zeldia's back.

I suppressed the trembling in my knees and stepped into the gazebo. Once inside, I found two ladies sitting at a table. One of them was of course Miss Louisa. She's just as lovely as always. However, Miss Louisa was seated in the far-left chair.

Huh? Miss Louisa isn't the hostess? Umm, uhh, who's that in the middle again...? I've seen her a few times in class before, right... Huh??

"Princess Alfina. Thank you very much for inviting us today." Mia greeted the hostess... Th-The royal princess.

My vision warped. No way. Huh? Why? How? Did she find out I disparaged her as unreliable? Is she going to yell at me...?

"Thank you very much for coming, Mia. Is the one next to you Lilka? This is the first time we've properly spoken, correct?"

"Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-Yes! I-I-I-I'm h-h-honored to make you aquatic... your a-acquaintance, Y-Y-Your H-Hind, High... Your Highness. I-It truly is the u-u-utmost privilege to..."

Why am I at the royal princess's tea party...? I sat down, just as I was told, and froze in place. The cup and saucer in my hands were clanging in rhythm to my trembling. I couldn't even taste what I'm sure is the most fragrant of teas. I mean, Miss Louisa personally brewed it herself.

Oh, I don't even remember how I greeted Miss Louisa. I *did* greet her... right?

"There's no need to be so tense. Princess Alfina is quite tolerant."

"O-Okay."

I turned into a complete yes-man. I really need to regain my footing. I can't

just stay so shaken all this time. Mia's even talking with the royal princess normally. So that means I should talk with Miss Louisa. In a sense, this is just as planned.

"Um, Miss—"

"Where would Ricardo be?"

"He's still in the archive. He said that his investigation might take some time, so he'll be late. I think he should be coming any time now." Mia answered the princess's question, and my consciousness was ready to fly away for an entirely different reason.

"Wha—?!?! You idiooooooot...!! P-Pardon me."

Not an idiot. Nobody's an idiot... I just want to crawl into a hole and die... Actually, dying is fine and all, but I can't get Mia involved.

"My, it seems things are quite difficult for Ricardo."

The princess answered Mia with a somewhat disappointed expression. She's not angry. At least not with Mia. And just as I tried to soothe my heart for my best friend...

"I'm very sorry for being late."

A familiar voice came from the entrance of the gazebo. A boy was standing there bowing his head deeply. There's seriously something wrong with his head, and I'm not talking about his hairstyle, or a case of bed hair. It doesn't matter how courteously he apologizes. Just being late to a princess's tea party is impossibly rude.

Wait, he really does have bed hair too?!

"Just the thought of showing up to a tea party full of young ladies following the etiquette of high society made my feet feel as heavy as lead."

And he added on a comment that can't even be called an excuse. I reflexively jumped with a start. He's wrong, right? I'm not a young lady, right? Actually, why is he even here?

"I've been quite worried since you haven't been to the Academy ever since the celebration, Ricardo."

Why does the princess know anything about the attendance of some commoner...? Huh? The princess's face is really cheerful. Enough for a complete outsider like me to see it. She's even half up on her feet as if she couldn't wait any longer...

"I'm sorry to have caused you concern. Her Grace's demands have kept me somewhat busy."

"It does seem that my aunt is quite interested in those stocks you told her about."

"I thought we couldn't actualize stocks for at least another five years, no matter how smoothly things went, so it's been quite difficult. There's all sorts of things to consider, like conforming to this wor... the Kingdom's laws."

The princess and Weinder began talking about vegetables. Not only that, from the flow of their conversation, it seems he's even acquainted to the Archduchess of the West.

"The detailed explanations are summarized here."

Mia put a paper in between the princess and Weinder. Amazing, she's even explaining things to a princess. About... vegetables???

Um, they're talking about cornstalks, right? Or beanstalks? It's food, right? Shirley's family deals in them. Are vegetables like that popular in the royal palace? I'll have to ask Shirley later.

Hang on, I'm talking even less than Weinder. At times like this, the person in the lower position needs to be the one to change the topic.

"U-Um, Miss Louisa. The Academy Festival will begin in just over a month, won't it?"

"Now that you mention it, I do believe it does. Will you be participating, Lilka?"

"Y-Yes. I'll be putting up a shop with the other child companies under the Kendalls."

"I was unable to see it last year because of my duty at the cathedral. So you'll be setting up a small shop within the Academy?"

The change in topic managed to attract the princess's attention. I-It's alright, I'm the daughter of a mercantile house, I can explain this.

"Yes. The students use goods from their families to open temporary stores within the classrooms and gazebos and such. Our family sells milk, eggs, and other similar goods, so we will be bringing those in to prepare a light meal."

The Academy Festival is held to commemorate the day the king from three reigns ago allowed commoners to attend the Royal Academy. It's a festival, but its true nature is a fight to the death. To the sons and daughters of mercantile houses, it's an important stage where we can demonstrate our own value, as well as that of our families, to future customers.

It's taboo to make a move on another company's clientele, but it's inevitable that nobles will come to buy things on their own at a festival. And using that as a public front, we're able to expand our customer base. Of course, it's also possible to have customers stolen from you.

Merchants who fail during the festival are naturally looked down on by their peers, and unsavory rumors will even begin to spread within noble society. To exaggerate it somewhat, it influences the very fate of one's house — especially this time around, with the election for the next guild representative making things even more chaotic.

"So all manner of goods will gather at the Academy for sale? It sounds rather lively and fun."

The princess put her slender white fingers together in front of her chest. It looks like I got her to understand. Not that it's any fun for us, though.

"The companies which deal in food are the main attractions, right? What will you be doing, Weinder?" Miss Louisa asked.

"It's somewhat difficult to participate at our scale. We're too short on hands."

He really is unmotivated. Why are you even here? It might just be my imagination, but this atmosphere leads me to believe that the princess would just carelessly show up at a shop if he set one up and invited her to it.

"Short on hands, is it...? Um, would I also be able to participate?"

“O-Of course. I do believe everyone would be honored by your patronage, Princess Alfina. At any rate...” I replied, and suddenly remembered something serious as I sprang to my feet. “Th-Though it humbles me to say, I have yet to offer you my gratitude as a citizen of the Kingdom for your efforts in averting the recent disaster.”

To think I’d forget something so vital. Isn’t this what I should’ve said upon meeting her?

“I simply fulfilled my duty as the Oracle. If you are to offer gratitude, it is actually Ric—”

“Speaking of the Academy Festival, I heard rumors that emissaries from the Empire have applied to observe as well. Have you perhaps heard anything regarding this, Lilka?” Miss Louisa asked.

“Huh? Oh, y-yes. Talks of expanding the foreign trade in food have been passed around.”

Unlike the open plains of the Kingdom, the Empire is covered in mountains. It’s easy to imagine how those lands are unsuitable for producing food. The trade of food for minerals between our two countries is well established these days, but 40 years ago, there was a war where the Empire apparently aimed to take control of the Kingdom’s food sources.

I can’t say it aloud here, but since the prices for exports are entirely under the state’s jurisdiction, it’s impossible to turn a profit unless it’s managed on a tremendous scale, especially after factoring in transportation costs. It would also lead to a scramble against the child company of the Dreyfans, which currently manages the exports.

“So there really has been an increase in monster activity in the Empire... The hell is going on with the ley lines?” I murmured.

“There are stories of monsters far higher ranking than the ones in the Kingdom too. It’s said they possess enormous magicite crystals, and can even stay active a fair distance from the ley lines,” Louisa said.

“Meaning the Empire has become a shield for the Kingdom in a sense...”

Weinder began brooding over something. Why is he far more passionate

talking about monsters with Miss Louisa than he is about the Academy Festival? He doesn't even seem to realize he just cursed in front of royalty.

"...It seems the terms of trade will be determined while taking that into account," Louisa added.

"So, if the Empire is done in by those monsters..."

"There are legends of an invasion of enormous dragons passed down in Morland. They go back to before the founding of the nation, so the authenticity of the stories isn't quite clear."

Each time Weinder talks, the conversation derails more and more towards topics unsuitable for a tea party. I kind of started this one, but isn't this still wrong? Can't we just talk about honey?

After that, Weinder remained at the center of the conversation for some reason, and the tea party went on. And then, without knowing how we got through without it turning into a big mess, it came to an end.

*

"Th-That was exhausting..."

After leaving the gazebo, I finally let the tension out of my shoulders, and began rotating them like my dad would after he got back from work.

"I feel like I just learned what cold sweat feels like."

"Sorry. I thought I told you who the hostess for the tea party was," Mia said while standing next to me.

"I-It's okay. I mean, Miss Louisa even remembered my name. We made a promise for next time too. I need to report this to Maria... It's all thanks to you, Mia, but..."

I looked behind me. Weinder and Princess Alfina were still talking at the gazebo's entrance.

"Who in God's name is he?"

Thinking about it calmly after it all ended, I figured it out. Weinder was the one invited to the tea party by the royal princess, Mia accompanied him, and I

accompanied her.

Even looking at them now, the princess was actually the one who looked like she found it difficult to part... My intuition as a woman and my common sense as a person were in direct confrontation.

“Ricardo is just Ricardo.”

“Umm, how do I put it? I don’t really get it, and I don’t really want to cheer you on, but I’m cheering you on.”

“I don’t understand when you just put a bunch of random words together like that... But thank you.”

Mia let out a small laugh and her growing braids swayed in the air. *I take it back. Mia really is wasted on Weinder.*

Chapter 4: The Princess's Part-Time Job

“Ricardo. Does the number 12 jar go on this shelf?” A sweet girl standing atop a stool asked me. She was balanced on one leg, with the area from the hem of her skirt to the back of her knee exposed. A truly dangerous sight to behold.

She wasn't wearing the uniform I was used to seeing her in, but was instead wearing a white dress with a short skirt and a dark blue corset made of thin leather. The hem of her skirt was dyed light blue, gradually turning white as it went up her body. This was likely something similar to casual wear for a princess, but how much time did it take for a craftsman to create that gradient by hand?

“Please line them up in numerical order. Anyway, please be careful...” I replied.

I don't really care where you put it, just please don't hurt yourself. This was my honest and far more urgent hope as her workplace supervisor, though her enthusiasm prevented me from saying this aloud.

“Yes, understood.”

The hem of her skirt swayed in tandem with her movements as she placed the jar atop the shelf. The sweet aroma in the air of this confined cellar is supposed to be the same as usual, filled with honey as it is, but for some reason it smells even sweeter today.

Not that it's the time to be thinking of such things. I simply decided to accept the reality that a princess is here in our company's cellar. This all started just one hour ago.

On the morning of the second day of summer break, my foster father came down to the company cellar of our shop in the capital. The president of our Weinder Company always maintains an easygoing attitude, so it's difficult to gauge the situation by looking at his expression. That's why it's quite unusual to be able to tell that he's clearly bewildered.

After coming out of the cellar and going to the front door as instructed, I knew that all my plans for the day had just flown out the window.

My classmate, whom I shouldn't have been able to meet for the next month and a half, was standing right there. She was armed with a letter of invitation from her guardian, who also happened to be a prospective investor with whom we're having grueling negotiations with, Archduchess Berthold.

The so-called stocks are difficult to understand, so an inspection was in order. And since her niece was interested in the work of our company, she left said inspection to her. Or so the archduchess wrote, anyway.

"Please treat me well," she said with a curtsy, as if making an invitation to a dance.

Next to her was her underclassman maid, Alicia, glaring at me. That knight, Claudia, wasn't with her.

The maid then went on to give me a very, *very* detailed explanation of the bracelet on Alfina's arm. It could be used to emit mana and notify her nearby guards of a crisis. And after turning around to glare at me several more times, she returned to their carriage.

She was surely very worried. And I was in complete agreement. Not that she'd sympathize with me. As for my foster father, he basically traded places with my classmate and boarded the carriage. Now then, just who was going to have a harder time: the guardian or the pseudo-guardian? Awkwardly enough, Mia was out on an errand.

After beckoning the princess over to our parlor room, which had nothing but a table and a few chairs in it, I tried to gloss this all over by introducing her to a new way of eating honey or something. I was fully prepared to reveal a portion of my secret modern knowledge. However, without even giving me the time to brew some tea, Alfina said that she wanted to help me with my job. And thus,

the tall order of entertaining royalty began.

*

That's how Alfina ended up counting the jars on the shelf. It's not like we store jars of different sizes to match the size of each order. Having the same size container used for all our goods is very valuable. Everything from the delivery and transportation to storage is made far more efficient this way.

This is especially important in our case, where we don't have enough hands to go around, and require our customers to come here and pick up their deliveries. After emphasizing this point, I left the work to Alfina, judging it was the safest possible job.

Thinking of it normally, this is boring and simple work. However, Alfina didn't utter a single complaint and continued to put her all into it. Her awkward handling of the jars was even charming.

And then, just as she faithfully began lining up the jars in order...

"Ah..."

"Look out!"

Alfina's hand slipped. Even though our jars are quite valuable, one or two of them breaking is still within our expectations. What's outside *my* expectations is the girl stretching her hands out towards the falling jar, causing her stool to sway.

I ignored the falling jar and grabbed Alfina by the waist. The jar fell to the floor, and tumbled about as it rolled in front of us. It was cracked along the lid, but since the jar was empty, no honey came pouring out. Yet the sweet scent in the air was thickening nonetheless.

"Sorry. I messed up... Um, I'm okay now, so..."

She wasn't reaching for the bracelet on her arm, but I could see Alfina's cheeks turn red as she looked back up at me. And just then...

"Sir? Starting with the sexual harassment already?"

A cold voice stabbed me in the back. My secretary, having mastered the use of the term I taught her, had returned.

“Y-You’re wrong. I was just considering the worst-case scenario where she would get hurt.”

“By falling from a stool that doesn’t even go halfway up to your knees?”

I let my hands go in a panic, and Alfina cast her eyes to the floor. Mia’s two braids, that had begun to grow longer lately, were swaying about at the top of my field of vision.

*

“Please start by explaining how exactly you ended up like this.”

Mia made us stand in front of the shelves and began interrogating us. It seems she has something to say about suddenly having a new junior at work. That’s understandable, but it’d be nice if she could hold back that look she’s making as if she had just found a couple trespassers.

“I was being unreasonable, and far from helping, I even got in the way. Please allow me to compensate for the broken jar.”

Alfina apologized and picked up the fallen jar. She then began brushing its surface without paying any mind to getting dirty by doing so.

“You’re right. Your current value in doing work here is completely in the negatives, Princess Alfina. I’m not talking about the jar, either. It’s because you’re stealing the time of our company’s greatest asset. It seems you have an interest in the Academy Festival, but the Weinder Company is not a school shop.”

“...You’re... right...”

“H-Hey, Mia, that’s going a little—”

“The one who bears the largest responsibility for this is the supervisor, of course.”

Mia turned to look at me. The subtle way her eyebrow was raised told me that she wasn’t disparaging Alfina for this.

“Well, you say that, but... Actually, I guess I can’t really say anything in my defense, huh?”

It's true that I didn't make a plan and just gave her something arbitrary to do. I clearly should have recognized the problem with that. Hence, being unable to deal with it was my fault.

"From your perspective, it looks like I was keeping Princess Alfina company as she played around while I was in the middle of work, right?"

Alfina gripped the hem of her skirt with both her hands and stared at the ground.

"However, I doubt that Princess Alfina came here out of idle curiosity or whimsy either."

She really did come here in a festive mood. That's because this girl has a strong sense of admiration for the world she'd never seen before. But at the same time, she seriously tried to face her work step by step, her clumsiness notwithstanding.

"Schemer though you might be, you are much too lenient, so you can't be trusted, sir. Please answer me, Princess Alfina. I do think it would make more sense for me to explain the numbers behind Her Grace's investment rather than doing any manner of work."

Mia's gaze remained as sharp as ever as she looked over to Alfina. The princess then let go of her skirt, and looked Mia right in the eyes.

"I thought... I couldn't possibly go on like this. I've been thinking about it ever since Ricardo helped me. After seeing that prophecy, my voice wouldn't reach anyone. Nobody believed me. That's why I was happy when Ricardo listened to what I had to say. I feel like I was saved by that."

Alfina paused for a moment before continuing.

"But... Ricardo is completely different from me. My voice couldn't reach Professor Fulsig and my aunt, yet both of them were spurred into action. Ultimately, even the Kingdom moved, and the disaster was averted. Ricardo was truly promising through all of it."

She then put both her hands together in front of her chest.

"As someone who must accomplish her duty as the Oracle Princess, all I've

been doing is relying on Ricardo. I've heard from Professor Fulsig... Ricardo thinks there may be another prophecy to come, and has already been making preparations to face it. So if I were to remain as I have been..."

Alfina turned to look at the small cellar.

"No matter how hard I try, I don't think I can accomplish the same things Ricardo is capable of. But... I want to try to understand, even just a little bit more. So I thought that if I knew more of Ricardo's work, then I'd be able to figure it out, even if just a little."

She's really overestimating me. Everything I offered was nothing more than knowledge from my previous life.

"...But I suppose I was just being selfish. All I did was have Ricardo spoil me once again, haven't I? And you as well, Mia... Even though you helped me so much too..."

"Is that all?"

Mia didn't stop her interrogation, even after hearing Alfina's answer. Did she sense a contradiction of some sort? I of course also have doubts of my own, regarding her fixation on a duty that was forced on her, that is.

"Th-That's, um... A-Also... Uh... I wanted to... how to... Ricardo..."

What about me? Is there something about me behind her motives? I waited silently for her to continue, but Alfina fell completely quiet.

"Meaning, it's not the Weinder Company, but Ricardo himself that you..." Mia muttered with an increasingly displeased expression. Her fingers were moving as if tapping at a piano on her legs. This was a habit of hers whenever she was thinking of a difficult math problem. What kind of equation did she pull from that?

"Regarding the first matter, I have no choice but to accept that you put some serious thought into it, at least more than a certain someone just chasing after girls. I do think it stands to reason that you should put your best foot forward, as long as Ricardo plans to proactively get involved with any upcoming prophecies. As for the second matter... We do need you to understand our company to a certain extent..."

Mia spoke as if I was jumping into the disasters from prophecy of my own accord. That's a misunderstanding. I'm making sure that such a situation isn't thrown upon us, and if the time comes, we'll at least be prepared enough to avoid being so hard-pressed. In other words, this is for my own self-preservation.

"It seems we have no choice but to accept your help."

My employee apparently found a solution while her boss was worrying over it. Judging from her expression, though, it was an imperfect solution.

"However, I have conditions. The sexual predator over there is out of the question, so I'll be supervising you. Consequently, the only thing we can show you are the regular activities of our company. You won't be able to acquire any detailed information about... what you're hoping for. Is that still fine with you, Princess Alfina?"

"So I can stay? Thank you very much. I'll be in your care, Mia."

Alfina nodded with a serious expression after accepting Mia's provocative and testing gaze, which was entirely unsuitable to be pointed at royalty. And though I personally found it completely incomprehensible, the two of them seemed like they shared some sort of common knowledge. I guess that comes from both of them being girls?

Also, Mia? The things you know about are a little different from the normal activities of a company, so do be careful.

"Then, for your first job..." Mia nodded as if shaking off her doubts, and pointed at Alfina's dress. "Those clothes are out of the question. Please get changed."

*

"Sir, please pay attention to the ledger, not the girls."

With that, Mia shut the door, and I was left in a staring contest with the ledger before me. I passed my gaze over the wall of numbers as the sound of two girls chatting leaked out from the adjacent room.

Right now, in that very room, the princess was getting changed. I felt like I

was about to imagine what was beneath that white dress of hers, and buried my face into the ledger. And at that moment, I heard the door opening.

“U-Um, Ricardo? How do I look?”

I timidly raised my face from the ledger, and found a girl standing there with an entirely different sort of destructive power from before.

At a glance, it was the simple dark gray dress that employees of most any mercantile house wore. The skirt was a little shorter than what she had on before, and she wore a white apron over top of it. The apron had small frills on its contours, but overall it was a completely normal outfit.

The gap from her usual attire is already pretty dangerous, and yet she also milled about in confusion at the clothes she wasn't used to wearing. Her blue eyes shook with a lack of confidence, and she picked at her skirt idly while looking down at her chest.

“What's the matter, sir?”

Mia was standing there wearing a matching outfit, questioning me even though it was clear as day that she knew the answer. But I'm not some stupid kid who would blurt, “Hey, you're streaking!” at the naked king. Sometimes the truth is cruel. And the truth spoken by the weak isn't only sometimes cruel, it pretty much always is. To the speaker, at least.

“...It suits you very well.”

But I guess in this case, flattery and the truth happen to be the same thing.

“I'm glad you think so.”

Even though it should have been tremendously rude to say that a commoner's outfit suits her, Alfina put her hands to her cheek and smiled.

“So once more, please do take care of me, umm... Master Ricardo?”

““Just Ricardo is fine.””

Both Mia and I replied instantly. Any bigger a gap will be a matter of life and death for me.

Three days have passed since we got our new part-time worker. According to Mia, she's more thorough at her work than I am, apparently.

I stood in the kitchen while cutting some bread and took a look at how the two of them were doing. The princess was currently wiping down a shelf with a cloth under Mia's supervision. It was a scene that made a cold shiver run down my spine. If this was a horror movie, I'd be running away barefoot. Fortunately, ever since that one time, a poltergeist-like phenomenon had yet to occur.

Anyway, I've really gotten used to seeing her after three days. She's going by the name Fina while working here, just like she did in Reylia. And seeing how she was at work, nobody would even believe me if I joked around and said she was actually Princess Alfina. Once accustomed to it, humans are capable of growing used to being around danger.

I'm especially worried about Mia's future though, after watching her pass her finger over the cleaned shelf and saying, "It's still dirty." I really felt like labeling her as a naggy sister-in-law, but somehow managed to stop myself. That sort of character stereotype exists here as well, so it's pretty obvious what kind of hell I'd be in for if she heard me.

Setting that aside, there's a need for me to participate in Alfina's education starting today. What I'm cooking up is the visual material I'll be using for just that purpose. This is my trump card for regaining my dignity as the senior employee.

Back when I was a student, I fell in love with this stuff just eating it cold. I would always pick some up at the convenience store while getting anything else I needed during my job hunting. And here, I have a special recipe for making it, even with the equipment and ingredients widely available in this world.

"Setting aside the milk and eggs, you're also using honey...? Won't it be too sweet, sir?"

And as I got to work with what equipment we had in the kitchen, which was, far and beyond, magnitudes more inconvenient than what I had in my tiny one-room apartment, Mia came over next to me and stared at what I was doing. She was supposed to be supervising Alfina, but it seemed she'd grown curious.

"We managed to get the fresh milk and eggs from your friend, and we've got

more than enough honey to sell. You like sweets too, don't you?"

"Whatever."

Mia huffed and looked to the side, then went back to supervising her junior.

"I'm sure her mood will improve after eating this."

The smell of butter being heated in the frying pan began drifting in the air. I picked up the elliptical frying pan, now caked in yellow. I had freshly baked bread from our neighbors, still hot from the oven, cut up into thick pieces next to me. After poking a few holes in it with a fork, I dipped it into the liquid seasoning. I cast the bread into the frying pan, and the pleasant sound of crackling filled the air, along with the irresistible scent of honey and butter. The chatting of the two girls behind me came to an immediate stop.

"It's about time we took a break."

"A break? What manner of work is that?"

For some reason, the princess was saying something that an exploited employee of a sweatshop would probably say.

"A break is preparations we make for the toils to come... Just kidding. Unusually enough, Ricardo looks like he's getting ready to reward his employees. It seems to be some sort of special confection I haven't seen before."

"Oh my, I'm looking forward to it."

My dear secretary raised the hurdle for this snack I was making just so we could have a break. Anyway, I'll prove to her that the Weinder Company isn't a sweatshop.

*

"So you've been here for five years now? That's around the same time that Ricardo started to make honey, right?"

"Yes. That's because it was a pipe dream that the village never thought would go well. So I was sent to the company as the most incapable of manual labor among all the orphans."

After I finished cooking, I walked over to Mia and Alfina and found them talking about the past. It really seems like they're opening their hearts to each other. I suppose, in a sense, these two have similar circumstances, having lost their parents.

"Is that so? And you've been together ever since..."

"Ricardo lacked all manner of common sense at the time, so it was quite the struggle. Though I suppose he hasn't really changed all that much regarding his common sense. Actually, he may have gotten worse."

Mia turned to look at me, and Alfina followed her lead.

"...You're right, I can also tell that Ricardo is special in many ways."

Their hopeful looks put even more pressure on me as I put the frying pan on top of the table. I took a wooden spatula and scooped up the golden bread with nice-looking burn marks.

"You sometimes make rather odd dishes, but this is the first time I've seen this one."

"The bread appears to be smeared in something? I'm looking forward to this."

I placed the still-steaming French toast onto a plate. Mia looked at it as though she were evaluating its price, while Alfina's eyes were sparkling with anticipation.

This is such a simple menu item back in the other world that you wouldn't ever bring it out for royalty. But here in this world, without anything resembling a refrigerator, it's quite the luxury to put multiple perishable foods together for a small portion like this.

"Please enjoy it with as much honey as you like. Without making it too sweet, that is."

"Thank you very much, Ricardo."

"...Let's see what you've got, sir."

Each of them took a knife and fork in hand. Alfina cut into the French toast with an elegance that completely betrayed her clothing, and Mia also kept up her etiquette to match. They both cut off a small bite, and had a taste at the

same time.

“...Hm?!”

“Oh my...”

I could tell it was a success from the way the two girls put their hands to their cheeks. I tried a piece for myself. Naturally, I just stabbed it with a fork and tore off a piece before tossing it in my mouth.

Upon biting in, it practically squirted with flavor. Perhaps because I misinterpreted the hardness of the bread, it turned out even better than I thought. It really was worth putting the time into making.

It only needs just a bit of honey. It really is a bit too sweet... Hey, that damn Mia is basically going all in with the honey.

“I’ve never had such a delectable confection. I can hardly believe that it’s made with bread.”

“It’s vexingly delicious. But it really is too sweet, sir.”

“I mean... I told you not to make it too sweet...”

Even though I warned her, Mia went to add even more honey. I don’t get her.

“We’ll need to request additional eggs and milk from Lilka, and refactor the puzzle for the household finances...”

“I’d love for my aunt and Shia to have some too.”

Mia was busy trying to raise the Engel’s coefficient of our house, while Alfina was thinking of how to bring some to the archduchess’s residence. Their delighted faces as they did so were satisfactory to me as well.

“By the way, sir...”

Mia looked at the last slice in the frying pan. Alfina was also taking little peeks at it. I’ve had enough sweets for myself, so it’d be fine to just split it in two for them, but...

“I’ll be using this one as teaching material.”

Today’s main topic begins now. Over the last three days, we had Alfina learn of the on-site ambiance at a copper company. I do think she did great for having

absolutely no prior experience.

However, the Archduchess of the West, Euphylia, did not send her niece here on a field trip. Considering Alfina's job at the cathedral, it was about time for us to move on to worldlier topics.

"Starting this afternoon, we'll have you learn about money."

So I said to our potential investor... or rather, our potential stockholder, out here on an inspection.

Chapter 5: The Essence of Business

“Let’s begin with a question. What is the most fundamental form of business?”

I began the lesson. It felt like going back to my university days, coaching one of my juniors. That was a far more peaceful lesson without involving royalty, though...

“Is it offering honey... umm, merchandise, and receiving money for it?” Alfina replied after thinking it over for a moment. Properly trying to think things through is one of her good points.

“That would be about half-correct. What we’re going to be talking about is a little more abstract than that. Ready? The most fundamental form of business is making money by spending money.”

Alfina cocked her head at the phrase I had prepared beforehand. I then piled 10 copper coins on the table like casino chips. Alfina looked at them, blinking in surprise. I completely ignored the sheltered princess’s, “Oh my, and what is that, I wonder?” look, and moved on.

“To be more specific, we buy ‘something’ with these 10 copper coins, and sell it to someone else for 20 copper coins. In this example, we turned 10 copper into 20. That’s business.”

I placed the initial stack of 10 to the side of the empty plate, and placed a new stack of 20 copper coins on the other side. I then pointed at the plate in the center.

“Meaning, the merchandise in the middle is irrelevant.”

By modern Japanese standards, a single copper would be something like 100 yen. However, owing to the difference in the standards of cost of living as well as the general cost of foodstuffs and merchandise, especially in the case of luxury goods, that sort of simple conversion doesn’t really mean anything. Suffice to say that copper is the lowest denominator of currency here.

“Sir? Even though you said you were being more specific, I think it’s still far

too abstract.”

“You’re right. Let’s see... Okay, suppose we open a store to sell this confection.”

I moved the last piece of French toast over from the frying pan and into the plate. Their gazes were now affixed on the golden bread.

“Please consider a business where we aim to sell this confection, Fre— Hmm... How about we call it ‘pain perdu?’ Pain perdu is made of bread, eggs, milk, and honey. And let’s say that the cost of ingredients for a single unit is 10 copper. And now we take our pain perdu, and sell it to our customers for a price of 20 copper. How’s that?”

I put the 10 copper coins on the right of the frying pan, and the 20 on the left. This would be a fair price for a slice of French toast. If the honey didn’t come from our own business, though, the cost may have to hike up to 100 copper, or even start being measured in silver.

“So you take the ingredients you purchased with money, and use it to gain more money, right? But... The ingredients alone aren’t enough to make this, are they?”

The results of Mia drilling into her the price of what’s required for business over the last three days were beginning to show. She did, in fact, turn completely pale upon asking how much profit flew out the window from just the single jar she broke.

“Correct. Practically speaking, we have the costs of transportation, the kindling, and even the frying pan to consider. Of course, we must also consider the cost of living of the one making the pain perdu as well. In this case, that’s me. Let’s say that all of these together roughly comes up to three copper per unit; this means the essence of this business is taking 13 copper to make 20. We’re selling confections, but in practice, it’s about the relationship from money to money. Do you follow along so far?”

I put three more copper coins on the cost stack to the right.

“I finally understand... But, um... It somehow sounds rather frightening, doesn’t it?”

“I won’t deny it. But please set that aside for now.”

Our talks here replaced the value of everything with money. There are, of course, exceptions. However, I’ll start by having her think of money as the basis. There are plenty of reasons for this, like how money is required to survive. But the most important reason is that it’s far “simpler” than topics including factors other than money.

“Let’s go back to the topic of business. We can split costs into two categories: fixed costs and variable costs. Let’s begin with fixed costs. The easiest example to understand is the rent for the shop. Let’s assume that renting the shop for one month costs 300 copper. If we’re able to sell one slice of pain perdu per day, that would mean the cost of rent for each unit can’t be covered by three copper. It requires 10 copper.”

I added seven more copper coins to the stack on the right.

“The ingredients cost 10 copper, and the rent costs 10 copper, so the total is now 20 copper. There are other expenses aside from rent, so this will end in a loss, right?”

“Precisely. However, what if we’re able to sell ten units of pain perdu per day? The cost of rent for a single unit will then go down to one copper. The nature of fixed costs is that it honestly adheres to the number of sales, and goes down accordingly.”

I removed nine copper coins from the right stack.

“On the other hand, the 10 copper for ingredients doesn’t change all that much, no matter how many we sell. There are also costs which become more efficient the more we’re able to sell, like the kindling.”

“Even though we’re thinking only in terms of money, it’s still rather complicated, isn’t it?” Alfina nodded in admiration.

“Let’s say we’re capable of selling out at 10 units every day. Our cost for the ingredients is 10 copper per unit. For 10 units over 30 days, that comes up to 3000 copper. On the other hand, let’s assume that rent and all other costs total to 900 copper for the month. Just as I said when we began, business is about making money by spending money. That means we need money in the first

place.”

“Y-Yes. From what you’re saying, we would need 3900 copper to begin, right?”

“Exactly. That’s the money required for us to earn money. Let’s call it the capital cost.”

Mia wasn’t saying anything, but she’s probably already done formulating all the profit ratios and functions for fluctuations brought about by sales. I’ll have her help out later.

“So, now I’ve taken the 3900 copper that I’ve desperately accumulated as my capital cost, and I start my new business. The deliciousness of pain perdu gives me a reputation, and the business is a success. I’m now able to sell 10 units per day. I’m selling each unit for 20 copper, so in one month, I make 6000 copper. In other words, I started a business that spends 3900 copper, and made 6000. Meaning I’ve profited by 2100 copper in a month. For the average commoner, this is enough money to live for over half a year.”

“Business really is amazing, isn’t it? But... It really is delicious, so it might just be fully deserved.”

Even though I was putting it in a relatively depraved way, Alfina’s thoughts remained as sweet as ever. However, the sweet portion of our lesson is about to vanish completely. “People don’t live in a bubble,” was one of my professor’s catchphrases.

I exchanged looks with Mia.

“Now then, let’s say there’s someone out there watching me carefully as I celebrate over the huge profits I’m raking in. I’ll leave this role to Mia. Okay, Mia, what do you do now?”

“I just need to crush your shop, right?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s right.”

“Huh?!”

Alfina was left completely shocked over our short exchange. I guess it’s hard to understand when we suddenly jump to this topic, huh? Actually, Miss Mia?

This isn't a latent aspiration of yours, is it?

"Let's say I'm the child company of a major mercantile house. And now, I hear of a bothersome... conceited merchant, selling strange confections in the capital and making a killing from it. I pretend to be a customer, and after investigating the shop for myself, I chuckle. Pain perdu is not only composed of easily attainable ingredients, it's simple to make." Mia looked at me with a provocative gaze. "I have 200 silver, which amounts to 20000 copper, on hand as capital. Now, what should I do to crush the conceited little peddler and monopolize all profits from this?" Mia turned to Alfina and asked.

"U-Um... You'll be doing something bad... I think? So, uhh, you buy up all the ingredients...?"

Ooh, I'm impressed she could come up with that answer.

"No, I will challenge Ricardo using purely proper methods. And that's by taking on debt."

"...A debt?"

Alfina cocked her head. It's pretty hard to understand taking on debt despite being rich, isn't it? However, the greatest power of the rich is the ability to take on debt. In the capitalistic system of Earth, you can even say that business is a game where you compete to see who is capable of taking on the biggest debt.

"I use my 200 silver and the trust in my house as collateral, and borrow 200 silver. Meaning, I now have a total of 40000 copper. I've now prepared over 10 times Ricardo's capital."

Alfina listened attentively to Mia's "Crush Ricardo Plan."

"Using 10 times his capital, I prepare a shop three times as large as his, hire three times the employees, and stockpile a large amount of ingredients. I then sell 10 times the amount of pain perdu that he can at a price of 16 copper per unit."

Mia placed 16 copper coins next to the 20 copper coins I had on the left.

"So you're selling it cheaper than Ricardo, right? I understand that this will trouble Ricardo, but will your shop be okay like that, Mia?"

“Please think back to what we talked about earlier. When the business grows, the cost of a single unit of merchandise goes down. Even though the shop is three times bigger, the rent won’t be more than double. And above all else, with such a large difference in scale, it will even affect the cost of the ingredients. That means that the ingredients will only cost us seven copper a unit.”

“It becomes that much cheaper?”

Even here in this world, where goods are not overflowing with abundance, the difference in scale between 10 and 100 items is big enough for a 30 percent drop in price to be a reasonable assumption. To the seller, the labor cost for a single transaction doesn’t change for 10 times the amount sold. And to take it a little further, the capital that Mia possesses also has a charm in terms of trust for future business.

“Let’s compare the two shops. Ricardo’s shop requires 13 copper per unit. Mine costs 7 copper for ingredients, and including the other expenses, let’s say it goes up to 8 copper per unit. In other words, Ricardo is making a 7 copper profit per unit, and I’m making 8.”

“So even though you’re selling it for cheaper, you’re the one making far more money... But, oh yes, do debts not require a payment of interest? Ricardo is only using his own money, so there’s no interest.”

Well, that’s what you’d think, huh? Debts are a loss. That’s the normal feeling people get from them.

“The interest from a debt is the same as rent. The cost per unit drops dramatically as we sell more goods. My profit off each unit sold is 8 copper, and over the course of a month, I’ll sell 3000 units. That means I make a profit of 24000 copper, or 240 silver. Even if the interest is 10 percent a month, that only sums up to 20 silver. I can easily afford it.”

And that’s how it goes. Interest is the same as a fixed cost. It’s a simple expense to doing business.

“So, what will you do now, sir?”

“I’ve got no choice. I’ll lower my price to 16 copper too. This way the price is

the same.”

I took four copper coins from my stack.

“Then I’ll lower it to 15.”

Mia took one from hers.

“Urk, 14.”

I continued the match despite knowing that I’d already lost. At this point, Alfina was already looking at me with sympathy in her eyes.

“So, Mia is capable of dropping the price far more, right?”

“Exactly. In the competition of dropping prices, my profits will zero out once it drops to 13 copper. The expenses include my own cost-of-living, so I’ll still be able to survive. However, if Mia drops the price down to 12 copper, it’ll all be over for me.”

I raised both my hands in the air. I couldn’t win against the rich. That’s what it comes to.

“Please wait. If you also borrow money...”

“Nobody out there will lend money to a small-time trader. Even if you could find one, with the level of trust I possess, it would be impossible to get a debt at a 10 percent interest rate. And naturally, it would be impossible to borrow 200, let alone 360 silver.”

“That can’t be... Even though it was your idea...”

Alfina bit down on her lip. Sorry, I didn’t think of it either.

“Incidentally, once I finish crushing Ricardo’s store, I raise the price again and rake in even more profits. It might even be a good idea to buy Ricardo and his crushed shop altogether and put them to work too.”

Alfina was now completely frightened of the corrupt merchant with black braids. It looks like my dear secretary’s realistic acting got it across to her just fine... Though that bit at the end was a little scary for me as well.

“The expense of the acquisition of money in this case is the interest. We think of it the same way we think of the cost for ingredients being the expense for

their acquisition. In short, Mia's business used the 200 silver she had on hand and a 20 silver interest to acquire 200 more silver. Putting that together, she turned 400 silver into 640 silver. In other words, using the money she paid a 10 percent interest to acquire, she was capable of making more than a 50 percent profit. As long as you're capable of earning more than the interest, a debt is actually favorable."

In this case, you never pay back the capital no matter how much you make. That's because the debt you borrowed at a 10 percent interest rate continues to produce more than 10 percent profit. Paying back the debt actually leads to a loss.

We did, of course, assume that our market scale was infinite to keep things simple. In reality, there are many cases of constant expansion causing companies to be crushed by their debt.

"As long as doing business is based on spending money to make money, the one capable of preparing more money will win. That's the other meaning behind this lesson."

"...It really did end up as everything being about money."

Alfina nodded steadily as she digested the information, and she looked between me and Mia with an anxious gaze. Anyway, let's keep going until we're done. The reason I brought up such a depraved story was entirely for what came next.

"Now then, let's swap this pain perdu for Weinder's honey. Our honey enterprise can't be as simply replicated as this confection. We're also quite careful in concealing information about it. However, we're about to begin increasing the production of our honey. The bigger our business gets, the easier it is for information to leak out. That means that we must be prepared before a larger merchant than us has their eyes on the method behind making our honey."

In truth, Dreyfan already had his eyes on it, but that's been settled, so we'll leave it aside.

"There are two advantages to Her Grace's investment."

“The first is the money itself that you would get from my aunt, right?”

“Correct.”

“And what would the other be?”

“The trust born of the very fact that an archduchess is investing in us. With the funds invested in us by a grand noble, the Weinders will be capable of taking on debts at a lower interest rate. In other words, we’ll no longer lose in a competition of debts.”

It’s actually more complicated than that. Using the trust we build by gaining capital from the archduchess, we’re planning to water down the equity she has in the Weinders. That’s because if we leave all necessary funding of our business plans from here on out to Euphylia’s financing, the Weinders will basically become hers.

Our goal is to sell as few of the (currently hypothetical) stocks that my foster father holds as we can, for as high a price as we can. We’ll then compensate for the rest of them by taking on debts using the trust we build from the archduchess. This is an exceedingly difficult negotiation that would be extremely convenient for us.

“I think I understand. I’m a little relieved. That means that my aunt’s proposal is a good thing for you, right? I thought, by some chance, that you were being manipulated by her idea.”

Well, there is a fair bit of manipulation going around. At any rate, it’s like someone buying a piece of paper written by the Weinders in gold without knowing about the stock system. It’s a difficult sell for us. At the present point, it’s only a sort of “contract” between the Weinder Company and the archduchess. There are no laws to support it, making it even more difficult for us.

“Just as I explained earlier, a debt is the lifeline for a company. Having that dependent on another person means that they have your very life in their grasp. Even without having to go that far, it means that Her Grace will hold a major influential voice in the Weinder Company. Setting aside her natural privilege as an investor, the problem lies in the difference in standpoint between a noble and a merchant. What we need at most is the freedom as a

merchant. That's why we proposed such a system for the investor's contract to Her Grace."

"The stocks, right?"

Alfina followed along perfectly. She really is a good student. I didn't think we'd get this far in a single lesson. Now then, what to talk about next?

And as I thought this over, I could hear the sounds of a carriage pulling up outside. It wasn't the time-limited use pumpkin carriage, but a full-on luxury one. It was time for the apprentice assistant to return to the castle, like some sort of reverse Cinderella.

"We got to a good stopping point anyway. Let's call it here for the day."

"Understood. Thank you very much... Um, can I perhaps ask one last thing?"

"By all means."

"What you talked about just now was simple to understand. By converting everything into money, many things can be seen as a single flow, right? But... that's exactly why it feels somewhat frightening. Um... Is money truly everything?"

And right to the very end, she followed along to the very essence of the problem. Now then, how should I answer?

"And what do you think, Princess Alfina?"

It's foul play to answer a question with a question. But this is a necessary step when the person in question doesn't have a clear vision of their doubts. I remained quiet and waited for Alfina's reply.

"...I don't think... it's everything."

"In fact, I agree completely. Without money, you can't feed yourself. But you can't feed yourself with money. If there were a true shortage of food, you would no longer be able to purchase food with money. If a hoodlum were to point their sword at you, even if you offered them money, they may just take both your life *and* your money. And furthermore, say you used money to hire a guard; you can't use money to judge whether the guard is trustworthy."

If there truly was some sort of omnipotent power out there, it would likely be

the ability to completely see another person's abilities and character. It didn't really need to be said, but it's far more difficult to obtain such an ability than it is to obtain money.

There are things you can't buy with money, and normally, such things are just that much scarcer and more important.

"I-I see."

"Now then, in terms of restricting it just to the range of business, let's think of money as the number one priority. A business spends money to earn money. So, would that mean the goal of business is to obtain money?"

What one gained from conducting business was profit, in other words, money. And if one doesn't possess money, one cannot conduct business. When everything is interpreted as money, then the means is money, and the goal is money. That constant cycle makes it harder to understand the meaning behind it.

"I don't know... Um, what do you think about it, Ricardo? I mean... What is your goal...?" Alfina asked me with upturned eyes.

She had long eyelashes and beautiful eyes. They somehow seemed even more earnest than ever before. I could tell that next to her, Mia's body had stiffened up.

Now what to do? I don't know what Alfina's goal is, and she's cutting to the chase before I can.

My goal, were it to be spoken aloud right now, is nothing but a pipe dream at this stage. Mia said it was something like creating an entire country, but the scale of the economic activity required to realize my goal would surely surpass the entire Kingdom.

Setting aside Alfina herself, how would Euphylia interpret such a thing? Just thinking of it made my head ache. This isn't the stage where I can test the stool beneath my feet as I stand here with the noose around my neck.

"The contents of our lessons so far are insufficient for me to explain my goal. You'll have to wait to hear my answer another time."

“Understood. I will try my best to better understand y... business, so that you can tell me. Please take care of me from now on as well.”

After I dodged the question, Alfina declared her enthusiasm towards continuing her studies. Huh? Did that sound like some sort of promise just now?

“R-Right. Then we’ll continue tomorrow...”

“Unfortunately for you, sir, Princess Alfina is off starting tomorrow. Incidentally, both you and I must go to the Academy the day after tomorrow. We’ve been summoned by the director.”

“Is that so? Was that when his laboratory was supposed to get done?”

There was no mistaking that he wanted to show off his new lab. So, we’re going to school in spite of it being summer break? I don’t have much of a choice considering the matter of mana measurement, but I wanted to have a little bit more time for leisure.

“My, are the two of you also going to be at the Academy? As a matter of fact, I have also been summoned by the Student Council President Hilda regarding the Academy Festival.”

Alfina had both her hands together in front of her chest as she smiled, implying full well how happy she would be if we met there.

I’ll need to be extra careful with my choice of words the day after tomorrow. If I accidentally call her Fina at the Academy, I’ll be in for all sorts of hell.

We headed towards the entrance of the shop, and found Alfina’s maid standing before the carriage. Now that I think of it, my foster father, who usually traded places with Alfina, wasn’t here this time.

“The Archduchess has yet to break. My heart feels like it’ll break any time now.” The maid handed me a letter containing a rare show of whining from my foster father.

And as I thought of our dear president, held captive within that large mansion, Alfina suddenly turned around to face me, as if she had just remembered something.

“Ricardo. There’s one thing I’d like to ask of you. It’s about Clau...”

Interlude 1: The Archduchess and the Copper Merchant

Light from the setting sun came pouring in through the second-floor window of a large mansion on the west side of the royal palace, shining over half of a white table sitting in the middle of the room, while a man and woman of clearly different statuses were facing each other across the table.

“And after that, your adopted son said, ‘The Weinders are small, but we’re not so cheap that we can be traded for a mere viscount.’ A truly splendid statement, don’t you agree?” The lady in a red dress said as she fanned herself elegantly.

“Th-That’s... Forgive his insolence...”

The one sitting across from her was a man who seemed like he wandered in while lost on the streets. He was somewhere in his late thirties, and wore a simple shirt and trousers befitting a merchant. This was his only good suit, one that he’d had tailored twenty years ago.

He hurriedly wiped his handkerchief across his brow right below his dark brown hair. You could say that his body was at its very limit from apologizing to the one who represented the king in the west, the lady who held tremendous influence over all business in the region.

“Hahaha, worry not. In any case, he was responsible for squeezing the western region out of a crisis. Even now, my niece is under his care.” The lady took a glance at the man, confirming his handkerchief was still dry. “However, there is one thing that I must ask. What was your motive for adopting such an abnormal boy? From what I’ve heard, he was nothing more than a child who suddenly appeared in the village. You had no relation to him whatsoever, right? Even if you had no wife or child at the time, was it not quite the bold move?”

The archduchess cut to the chase, still fanning herself as she spoke. The man put away his handkerchief. He looked out the window to the west, then quietly replied to the one sitting before him, whose difference in status compared to his could be likened to the difference between heaven and earth.

“I suppose you could say, such a thing is trivial with regards to my life?”

“Hmm...”

The archduchess’s hand stopped.

“Twenty years ago, I was but an 18-year-old boy. I was evaluated as fairly talented among my peers, you see, so I was entrusted with Nordgram’s branch office in a small city in the northwestern region. I had just gotten married to the main family’s youngest daughter as well. So at that time, I had quite a bright future ahead of me.”

He spoke with an aloof attitude, and a certain sense of self-deprecation could be seen in his expression.

“The Nordgrams were purveyors to the Felbachs, weren’t they...?” the Archduchess asked with a stiff voice.

The Felbach Rebellion occurred twenty years ago. Two archdukes and three dukes made up the Kingdom’s greatest nobles. Among them, Duke Felbach possessed independent power in the Kingdom’s western region due to the family’s history and geographical location. When he was no longer able to endure the restraints placed upon him by the preceding king, he incited a rebellion.

The mid-western Kingdom fell into chaos, changing the fate of many, including those in the archduchess’s surroundings.

“I was on a business trip to the capital at the time, and I was restrained for being related to the Nordgrams. By the time I finally returned to my new home, all that was left there was burnt ruins.”

The man spoke of his past in a detached tone, and the Archduchess of the West placed her fan atop the table and listened in silence.

“So, with such experience, it isn’t all that big a deal for a merchant to adopt someone who looked to be of great use, is it? That is to say nothing of... Well, let’s put the past behind us. The important matter now is the present. I’d like to refrain from getting involved in a quarrel between our esteemed grand nobles, let alone any quarrels involving the crown.”

The man, Paul Weinder, looked towards the opposite side of the royal palace, at the eastern mansion.

The one sitting across the table from him, the Archduchess of the West, Euphylia, was the central figure in the third prince's faction. And the leader of the second prince's faction, the Archduke of the East, stood in opposition to her. This was the topic that had the capital kicking up a fuss lately.

"I see. However, you seem to be misunderstanding something here." Euphylia accepted that his answer ignored over half of her question and moved on.

"Misunderstanding, you say?"

"Mm. Truthfully speaking, the third prince's faction does not actually exist. As you know, our nation adheres to hierarchy. If the eldest son, the crown prince, were to withdraw due to sickness, the second son, Prince Delnicus, would succeed him. The prince belongs to the prime minister's office and is in the middle of training to be a civil official, but that in itself is not a problem."

Euphylia paused for a moment, and stood the fan she placed on the table straight up.

"Of course, I have no intention of dividing the nation. Doing so would surely lead to chaos far greater than what occurred twenty years ago."

"I see..."

"However, that sturdy hierarchy has been shaken ever so slightly by the recent disaster; by the hand your adopted son played, to be specific. Naturally, we had no choice but to have Prince Craig step up in that situation. However, it's a surety that they were agitated by this. Those who are dissatisfied with or estranged by the Archduke of the East, Zangritch Kurtheight, or by Prince Delnicus, were excited by the potential rise of Prince Craig. And so, they placed at its center..."

"The Archduchess of the West. So they put all their hopes in you, Your Grace?"

"That's how it goes. However, that's not all there is to it. Think of those in your vicinity as well. The representative of the Caravan Guild, who oversees all traffic across the Kingdom, is Giverny. He has direct support from the prime

minister, Duke Grinicius. Then there are the artisan guilds, which oversee metalworking, timber and other manufactured goods. Not to mention the Carriage Guild, which supplies all carriages in the nation. The regions with the resources to produce their goods all lie in Archduke Kurtheight's territory. Their representatives were all appointed by his recommendation."

Euphylia shrugged her shoulders. In short, the second prince's faction possessed far more influence.

"And now the seat of the representative of the Culinary Guild, who was just barely keeping the balance, is empty. How troublesome."

"The Dreyfan Company was fundamentally neutral. They took the east, west, and center into consideration. Well, it's only obvious, considering their first priority was to conveniently have someone to protect their position regardless of where they were."

"That's how it is. The reason they got into contact with the knights was to gain information about the next king before anyone else could, and also to recover regulations within the guild, apparently."

"On the other hand, the most likely candidate for the next representative of the Culinary Guild, the Carlests, have their foundations set in Kurtheight."

"Having the Culinary Guild largely based in the east is somewhat of a headache to the one responsible for the west, you see."

"To think the issue of the Culinary Guild's representative would turn into such chaos... That will be quite troublesome for our Ricardo as well."

Paul once more pulled out his handkerchief, and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Let's stop with the idle chatter and get back to the topic at hand. No matter how much we speak of it, I don't quite have a grasp on the all-important point of the segregation of ownership. My retainer in charge of financial affairs also told me, 'Do not invest the assets of the duchy into such an insolent contract that has no precedent whatsoever.' So, how about handing over your stocks for about this much gold each? At such a price, even my retainers will agree to it."

"Oh no, that price will leave our company with nothing but our name. Each

stock needs to at least be around this much...”

Thus, the talks between the two continued on, even as the light shining through the windows passed over the fan on the table.

Chapter 6: The Real Estate Bubble of the Academy

Mia and I walked down the Academy's corridor in the middle of summer break. We were on our way back from the library director's office, or rather, the laboratory adjacent to said office.

We'd just finished passing on the idea of a parabolic antenna using a mana reflective catalyst to the old man. The basic gist of it is to reflect mana over a wide curved surface and accumulate it into a sensor, allowing us to increase the sensitivity and precision of observed measurements.

"The parabolic shape we need will rely on your calculations, Mia."

"Even if it's perfected in terms of numerical formulas, there are limits to the physical shape that can actually be made."

With absolutely zero disposition to mana, my business was done once I passed the concept over to him. Mia's calculations would play a far greater role than anything I could do going forward.

"The efficiency of the catalyst painted on the surface is still too poor as well. And just creating the trial version is going to cost us a pretty penny..."

As for the realization of the idea itself, I could do nothing else but leave it to the old man, who was acting like a grade school student on a research project over the summer break. His ability to gather research funds had gone up because of his recent accomplishments, but it was still somewhat insufficient.

"There's a whole mountain of problems, huh...? Anyway, there's more students around here than I thought there'd be."

We got closer to where the classrooms were, and found several students gathered in the hallways moving about busily. Every last one of them was a commoner, too. In probability terms, this level of one-sidedness was quite

literally impossible.

“They’re likely preparing for the Academy Festival.”

“Oh yeah, your friend... uhh, what was her name again? She mentioned something like that, didn’t she?”

“Lilka. Sir, refer to her as Torito if you ever see her.”

Torito, was it? I recalled the tea party we had before the summer break. She was the girl with orange hair tied up to the side. She seemed really pumped up about the festival, if I recall correctly.

Last year we concluded it was out of the question to participate, not only because we didn’t want to provoke the Dreyfans, but also because of the cost to do so.

This year we can probably afford it, but we don’t have any time because of our investment negotiations. I just finished assigning homework to Fulsig, too. It’s not like it’d be entirely impossible, but we really just lack the spare time to get involved. But really...

“Sir?”

I kind of want Mia to have a more student-like experience here, too. Unlike me, this is her first time being one.

“Oh yeah, Mia. It seems like that Torito invited you to—”

“Please wait a moment! Are you saying that this is also the Carlests’ space?!”

And just as I was about to ask what Mia’s hopes regarding the festival were, a familiar voice resounded from further down the hallway.

“Do you not see this certificate? This classroom is to be used by one of our child companies as the result of an official bid. More specifically, it’s to become a storehouse,” a haughty boy replied.

“That’s right. There’s no space for a small company like yours to participate this year,” another girl added.

Three students were having a dispute right in front of the classroom we left our bags in. On one side of the argument was a boy and a girl who seemed to

be upperclassmen. The boy was slicking back his hair, and the girl was standing there with an air of composure and a hand at her waist. Facing them was a girl with orange hair. I could see her tied up hair quivering in frustration from behind.

“Isn’t this supposed to be the calm and relaxing summer break of a refined Academy? What’s going on over there?”

“It’s probably something about the acquisition of space for shops.”

Mia looked at her best friend as she answered me.

“But, I mean... aren’t they being a little too rough about it?”

It almost sounded like a conversation with a land shark. *I heard that their companies’ reputations were on the line, but this is still a school festival, right? I suppose it really isn’t something for us to butt in on, considering we’re not participating. We can just enter the classroom using the other door.*

“Let’s just get our stuff and go home.”

“Okay...”

Mia was being evasive. Our classmate was desperately hanging on, but the upperclassmen weren’t giving her the light of day.

“Do you know who those two upperclassmen are?”

“I think they’re the Carlest siblings. The brother is a senior, and the little sister is a third year.”

“Carlest... They’re a gold company with the Culinary Guild, right?”

“They’re in a dispute with the Kendalls over the seat of the next guild representative.”

I see now. If I remember right, Lilka’s family deals in dairy products under the Kendall umbrella. The Kendalls and the Carlests... a confrontation between gold companies. Just that alone gets a big ‘no thank you’ from me.

“You Carlests are using your capital to buy up all the rooms you don’t even need, right? No matter how you put it, it’s far too tyrannical to not even let us participate!”

“We simply made use of the rules. You could have participated if you fairly won during the bidding, right? The Kendalls’ main office is splitting the auditorium with us, aren’t they? As ones who call themselves a deputy guild representative, should they not take care of those under their umbrella?”

“That’s... We planned to... But this is all because the rules changed without warning...”

Bidding, capital, rights... Well, I’m beginning to see the picture here. Anyway, she can’t even participate? The image of this girl firing herself up for the Academy Festival came to mind.

“Sir... Could you talk to Lilka a bit later...?”

Mia looked up at me with a tormented expression.

“Now that I think of it, how did you end up getting along with her?”

“That’s... Um, back when I wasn’t used to this place yet... Lilka helped me out.”

Mia is from a copper company, and not only that, she’s just an employee. By the standards of the Academy, her position is rather low. I see. I thought she ended up fitting in at school far better than I did, but there’s no way it was that simple for her. I guess I’ve got a big debt to pay that girl as Mia’s boss, then.

“A wonderful sample of the Carlest versus Kendall fight has just rolled out in front of us, waiting to be analyzed. We can’t let this pass.”

“Sir?!”

I walked down the hallway, and upon noticing this, the older brother turned towards me. He had black hair and a sturdy looking physique. His clothes were about as high quality as it gets among commoners, too.

“What? You here to complain too?”

“Far from it. I simply left my bag in this classroom. Could you perhaps allow me to enter?”

I took on the perfect attitude towards an upperclassman.

“There’s a door back there, isn’t there? Let yourself in.” The little sister told

me in ill humor. She had the same black hair as her brother in a bob cut. She had a harsh beauty to her.

“I just overheard something about not being able to use the classroom without permission. So I thought it best to inquire first.”

I was the very model of a junior respecting his upperclassman, grasping at my sense of self-preservation. *I deserve a pat on the back for this.* Yet for some reason, both of them were creasing their brows.

“That’s after we begin our preparations. What’s your name?”

“Pardon me for not mentioning it earlier. I am Ricardo Weinder, a second year.”

“Weinder? Have you heard that name before?”

“A copper. I can’t fault you for not knowing it.”

The two of them mentioned my all-powerful title — for making most students drop their guard — and quickly looked at me with contempt. *Yeah, that’s good. That’s how it should be.*

“Wait a sec, Weinder, what are you planning? Mia, you too...”

“Oh my, are you Lilka’s acquaintance?”

“I am at least acquainted with her. We attended the same tea party. But that’s about it.”

If pressed, I’d say that I feel like she hates me, though.

“Oh, could that perhaps be the tea party Lilka was talking about before the summer break? Teehee, I thought so. My, how swimmingly insignificant companies like yours get along. I shall give you a fair warning. The Kendalls and Carlests are both deputy representatives to the guild, but there’s a clear gap between us. A tiny company like yours really should reconsider its attitude towards us.”

I know. I got stuck with having to crush the Dreyfans because of that. But thanks to me doing that, you can set your sights on that guild representative seat that you want so badly, right? You could at least show a bit of gratitude.

“Hang on, the one who invited this guy is... No, never mind. You’re not participating in the Academy Festival, right, Weinder? Get your bags and get going already. This is between us.”

For a moment, I thought she was absolutely going to bring up Alfina and Louisa’s names. I don’t hate the stance she’s taking here at all.

“What, so you’re not here to beg to be allowed to participate? But that’s the correct decision. A company below Lilka’s couldn’t participate even if they wanted to.”

“Exactly. The weak must specialize in running away if they hope to survive, you know?”

The two siblings broke into laughter. I couldn’t have agreed more with them. However, the strong also need to be careful so that they avoid making too many enemies for no reason. *Don’t blame me if someone pulls the carpet out from underneath your feet. You do know about another company that was crushed recently for that exact reason, don’t you?*

“So I can’t participate, even if I’d hoped to? How very interesting. Could you perhaps inform me as to why? For future reference, of course, umm... Carlest, was it?”

I bowed my head, basically asking them for a sample I could use to analyze them with. *I’ll at least show some courtesy for having them give me valuable information free of charge.*

“It’s Theodore Carlest. Well, fine. I’ll provide some manner of guidance to my dense junior here.”

The senior student shrugged his shoulders in a burly manner, and went on to explain the mechanisms behind the acquisition of space for the Academy Festival.

“...I see. How very interesting.”

How outspoken of him. In short, there was a change of rules for the Academy Festival. The restriction on capital that participating companies could use had been removed. *Limited property and excess capital... It’s the exact mechanism behind the inflation of real-estate prices.*

What's more, they were even buying up all the classrooms, just like apartments they didn't plan to invest in or inhabit. So what should have been leftover space after the first round of bidding ended up getting snatched up. Lilka came here for the secondary round of bidding, and only learned of all this after the fact.

So basically, they're clamping down on medium-sized companies that didn't possess enough capital. Why are they going so far? What do they get out of so brazenly injecting such a capitalistic nature into a school festival? What is this, the Chicago School of Economics?

"Do you understand? At most, we are only making use of the official rules," the younger Carlest chimed in.

"Those rules changed this year out of nowhere, right? I bet you two made some kinda deal behind the scenes," Lilka complained.

"Oh my, do you plan on raising an objection to what the student council... to what Lady Hilda and Lord Leonardo decided on?"

"Ugh... I don't... But..."

Lilka cast her eyes to the floor in frustration the moment those two names were brought up.

"...Who?" I whispered to Mia.

"They're both fourth-year students. The president and vice-president of the student council. President Hilda is Archduke Kurtheight's eldest daughter, and the second prince's fiancée. Vice-President Leonardo is, if I'm not mistaken, the prime minister's grandson."

Hilda... that's a name Alfina mentioned just the other day. I suppose we've gotten ourselves into another fine mess again. Things keep jumping out and threatening my poor self-preservation. This time, they even came in a pair.

"Anyway, we're three weeks away from the Academy Festival. In short, the classrooms are reserved starting next week so that we can prepare."

"Exactly. You can do as you like today. So you have no complaints, right?"

Wait a second. You still haven't told me the all-important reason as to why the

rules were changed... Well, I guess I'll have Mia ask about the rest from her friend instead. And just as I was about to let the conversation come to an end...

"Ricardo, and Mia too. Thank goodness, we really did get the opportunity to meet."

A cheerful voice, completely incapable of reading the perilous atmosphere we created, called out to us. A beautiful girl with shining platinum hair was walking towards us from the other side of the corridor with Claudia at her side. It seemed that her aide had made her return.

A female guard capable of attending the Academy was quite valuable, after all. But why was she not stopping Alfina from getting closer to me, despite her being reinstated? Wasn't that her very purpose for existing?

"Your Highness. Um, are you acquainted with this man?"

The Carlest siblings, who were ever so overbearing with us, were panicking and took a step back.

"Yes. I am greatly obliged to both Ricardo and Mia," Alfina replied, as if boasting about her friends.

The two upperclassmen's faces were now dyed with fright. If they knew that she was obliged to us for our guidance in making her clean the floors and such, my self-preservation would probably fly out the window.

"And you are Lilka, correct? You were with us at the tea party the other day."

"Wh-What did you say?"

The little sister, I think her name was Zeldia, jumped with a start. *I guess even the heir of a giant company is scared of royalty.*

"I was just invited as an accessory to these two."

"Then next time, you must join us as well. By the way... What are you all doing in the corridor?"

Alfina looked at Lilka anxiously. It reminded me of the first time I got involved with her. At that time, she tried to stick up for me despite us never having talked before. And right now, Lilka was clearly far more...

“It’s nothing serious...”

“Right. It is nothing you need to concern yourself with, Your Highness.”

“But, could you at least tell me why...?”

The two land sharks were trying to regain control, but it had the opposite effect. *This walking field of flowers is a bit of an airhead, but she’s still relatively easy to fire up. Actually, I guess it’s not all that relative.*

“What are you all doing blocking the hallway? Is something the matter?”

Another voice called out to us from the opposite direction that Alfina came from.

“Lady Hilda,” Zeldia said in a pleading voice.

I turned around, and spotted a boy and girl who were clearly beyond the norm. They had jewels on their neckties and embroidery on their uniform cuffs. It was the attire of the very top class within the Academy. The girl had curled blonde hair and large breasts, while the boy was a slender hunk with glasses. Both of them were fourth years. *That must make this guy Leonardo.*

“Lord Leonardo as well? You’ve come at just the right time.”

Theodore verified my guess for me. *Wonderful. The number of people has multiplied, but there aren’t more names to remember.*

“Even Alfina is here? What exactly is going on?”

The upperclassman called Hilda looked at Alfina with a cold gaze. *Even if she’s an upperclassman, and even if Alfina was adopted into the royal family, dropping all forms of royal address is something else. Or maybe not. She’s the fiancée of the second prince. So is she trying to act like she’s already part of the royal family? Being the daughter of an archduke is already a big deal, isn’t it? She’s basically got all the titles to be a full-on storybook villainess.*

Quasi-royalty, a grand noble, and a gold company. It’s an awfully fishy looking lineup. And on our side, we’ve got a silver company, a copper company, and a princess. The Academy truly is a microcosm of the Kingdom.

“These underclassmen, of all people, were raising objections towards the decision of the student council. So we were simply providing them with

guidance.”

Now fortified by his two reinforcements, Theodore was the first to speak, even though he was acting all reserved in front of Alfina earlier. *How easy to understand. He skillfully pointed the blame entirely on me and Lilka. I can sympathize with him as an advocate of self-preservation.*

“Well, that cannot be allowed to pass.” The four-eyes... Leonardo looked at me while I was still trying to organize all their names in my head. “So, what’s this about?”

“There seems to be a misunderstanding here. All I did was request my senior to inform me of the new structure of the Academy Festival. I see now that it was a decision made by the student council. I would simply like to ask for future reference, but could you inform me as to the reason for the change in the rules this year?”

There had to be a reason for any manner of drastic reform, considering the Academy was a microcosm of the nation which respected precedence.

“It just means that a valuable opportunity should require a suitable compensation. Besides, all fees for use of the rooms are donated to the Academy. This year we managed to gather double last year’s amount. I do think this is something you commoners should be delighted about.”

My upperclassman in glasses continued to patronize me. The big companies paying those venue fees were all commoners too, though. It didn’t seem like there was any merit to this for the nobles. *But I guess these two can claim it as an accomplishment of the student council? Oh, I get it. This is like practice for the nobles to use commoners as their agents for levying taxes.*

Roughly speaking, this was appropriate for an educational institution. But surely there were conditions that still ought to have been fulfilled for educational purposes.

“Thank you very much. I understand now what the rules bring us. However, umm...”

I put on a bewildered expression, and Leonardo looked to Hilda. Her blonde hair moved ever so slightly as she nodded.

“Go ahead and speak your mind. The student council is here to lend an ear to the students’ opinions.”

“Thank you. I fundamentally don’t have any doubts or dissatisfaction regarding this ruling. Even from the position of a small company, having funds carries great meaning when doing business. The new rule adapts to the reality of the world; it’s surely important for the students to be able to experience the difference in financial strength, especially here at the Academy where one can still recover from a failure. I think this makes perfect sense.”

There are important things that can’t be taught by having everyone join hands in harmony. You could even say, this is simply the default setting to life. You can’t experience failure once forced into the situation.

Thinking of it from the perspective of the ultimate goal in life — survival — the main point is to be able to take one’s abilities and apply them depending on the situation. Competition itself essentially has no meaning. Even if you were to complain after you died, “The environment was too strict, and I would have survived under normal circumstances,” nothing can be done to recover. That’s reality.

“Precisely. The reform of the rules can also be explained from that perspective.”

Leonardo seemed to have found my comment unexpected, but immediately nodded in a haughty manner. This had me chuckling. *So the revision of the rules really is no more than an “educational goal” to conform to reality. This public stance is powerful precisely because this is an educational facility. Moreover, this vice-president is acting just like a bureaucrat’s grandson. He seems to love the concept of order.*

“However, what of its practical application? As long as this is meant for education, there is little point to it if one cannot participate at all. Excluding the students with less financial strength lacks the presence of education itself. Is this not different from the intention of the changes to the rules?”

Leonardo’s elite smirk vanished. Incidentally, the president’s attitude seemed to be saying, “What on earth is this pest talking about?”

“There are students who wish to participate but are unable to?”

And Alfina joined in on the conversation. We successfully managed to overturn frank business logic into business logic which was meant as a means for education. *Now then, how will the grandson of the one at the summit of all bureaucrats respond?*

“...I see. Your point stands to reason. It seems that the passion our participants showed in wanting to secure the best locations for their shops has yielded a somewhat extreme situation. We may have left too much to the participants’ discretion.”

Leonardo took on a truly neutral attitude. He’s quick on his feet, I see.

“However, changing the rules once more will have an even more adverse effect.”

“You’re right. Changing the rules arbitrarily will serve poorly as education.”

I made a show of affirming his stance. Of course, I implicitly criticized them for suddenly changing the rules anyway. It was basically an appeal that I wouldn’t back down so easily.

“...Then how about this? The classrooms that have already been allocated remain as they are. However, there are more rooms in the Academy than just classrooms. We can open the bidding once more for those rooms and restrict it to participants who failed to win a bid, so we can host a second round of bidding just as has been done in previous years. What do you think of this, Miss President?”

The president, who seemed to be paying more attention to Alfina than she was to our conversation, turned towards me.

“I think that’s a wonderful idea. I’ll allow it.”

“Please wait a moment. Rooms other than classrooms? Aren’t the remaining rooms all too small to...” Lilka said.

She’s right. Excluding the auditorium and the library, the classrooms are the largest rooms in the academy. The shops required more than just floorspace to sell things. Half the participating students and many of the guests at the festival will be nobles. There’s a need for areas such as cloakrooms, waiting rooms, and the like.

“Isn’t that where a small company can show off their skills? The Toritos’ store is no more than a tenth the size of ours, right? Are you saying you can’t do business like that?”

“Any further changes would be difficult to accommodate, considering the amount of time left before the festival.”

Leonardo nodded to Zeldia. *This is about the limit of what we can get them to compromise on. So let’s call it there.*

Actually, why am I, the one who isn’t even participating, acting like a representative for a silver company? Even the smallest silver is bigger than us.

“Thank you very much, everyone. I’ve learned much from this.”

“What’s your name?” Hilda asked.

“I’m Ricardo Weinder.”

“Ricardo... Oh, you were Alfina’s dance partner, right? So you truly are a commoner.”

She brought up a matter that was supposed to be treated as never having happened, save for a small number of people close to the Archduchess of the West. *I’ve got a bad feeling about this.*

“I’m sure that you will put up a magnificent shop as Alfina’s friend, I’m looking forward to it.”

Wait, how did it come to this?

“Please wait a moment. I never took part in the bidding. I don’t qualify to participate.”

“Hm? Even though you had no intention of participating, you spoke so much of the matter? Well, I suppose this works out for you then. Thanks to the new round of bidding triggered by your opinion, you’ll now be able to participate.” Leonardo declared as he pushed his glasses up.

“N-No. Even the cost for participating in the second round of bidding is far too large an expense for a copper. Having a shop at the Academy Festival is beyond the means of our company. If forced to do so, the most we could manage is a cart in the courtyard.”

“A cart?”

“Lady Hilda. This man is the son of a paltry merchant. A cart is...”

Zeldia whispered into Hilda’s ear, and Hilda’s smile twisted into a sneer.

“Oh my. So you still haven’t rid yourself of your awareness as a basket carrier. What shall we do, Lady Hilda?”

“It’s just as I said. I cannot simply cast aside a friend of Alfina’s. A cart in the courtyard... was it? That will do just fine. Register him as a participant. You won’t be using a room, so you don’t need to pay a participation fee. There are no complaints then, right? Heehee... Alfina will be supervising the courtyard as well, so this works out perfectly.”

Aren’t I so kind, even to such a lowly insect? That was what Hilda’s spider-like expression fully implied to me.

“Understood. Then I will process the required paperwork.” Leonardo nodded with a slightly troubled look.

I don’t need this kind of special treatment. A lonely cart in the middle of the courtyard is guaranteed to put me in the red. However, there was something else mentioned that was even more concerning.

“Um, Princess Alfina, you will be supervising the courtyard?”

“Yes. President Hilda entrusted me with this duty as an official of the Academy Festival. The buildings are left to President Hilda, and the gazebos are under Vice-President Leonardo’s supervision. So the courtyard between them has been appointed to me.”

Alfina informed me of this with a cheerful expression. I took a glance over at Claudia, who had completely stiffened up.

“Huh? But if you exclude the gazebos, there’s nothing in the courtyard...” Lilka said.

And now the other part of the puzzle came into sight. There was nothing in the courtyard to supervise. *Even if you consider my lonely little cart, nobles aren’t cognizant that such things are a shop. They surely won’t ever have a meal while standing up.*

“Up until recently, we had to take into consideration Alfina’s work at the cathedral, which prevented her from being present. But thankfully, I hear she’s been able to attend the Academy more often lately. Ergo, as a member of royalty, it is only proper that she bears a responsibility suitable of her position. The courtyard is appropriate for her first time handling such a task, wouldn’t you say?”

I see, so she was assigned an easy to handle location. But how is someone who is forced to supervise a place where nobody will come supposed to pass their time during the festival?

So this was the second prince’s fiancée. Alfina possessed the title of royal princess, whereas this daughter of an archduke did not. Hilda must have been relieved when Alfina was forced into the clergy, but the prophecy of a monster flood ended up boosting her reputation.

Furthermore, the future rival of her husband, the third prince, had played a great part in suppressing the flood from the prophecy.

I could construct the profile of this noble just from the gaze she pointed at Alfina. It was entirely possible that she got Alfina — and me — involved just so she could save face, which had no value to anybody but herself.

Well, crap. Was this yet another competition wrongly masquerading as survival of the fittest? Humans catch and eat fish because humans are the stronger beings; that’s survival of the fittest. It’s not for me to say whether it’s morally correct or not, but at the very least, nature permits it.

However, the thought that the fish must jump out of the water, turn itself into sashimi, and present itself on a dish at a human’s command is incorrect. The weak have the freedom to resist. Overcoming such resistance is the duty of the strong.

I took a glance out the window. *The courtyard, huh? Back in the other world, that would be prime real estate for a school festival. We’re also in a situation where some silver companies don’t have enough space.* A small prospect came into sight. *That’s not all, either... If I handle this right, can’t I resolve that other unresolved problem of mine? Okay. You’re on. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.*

“Thank you very much for your consideration. I shall make full use of the *courtyard* under Princess Alfina’s supervision.”

“Of course. I look forward to it. Seeing that you have Alfina’s favor, I wonder if you’ll show me something wonderful?”

“Give it your all.”

I bowed deeply as the two student council members turned on their heels, implying that their business here was done. The two Carlests glared at me hatefully, then immediately followed behind them.

“Sir...”

Mia stood next to Lilka with a troubled look. *I didn’t tell you to go that far, you say? Well, I didn’t plan on going this far either.*

Chapter 7: Microcosm of the Kingdom

“Uh, um...”

After the self-important lot left the hallway behind, Lilka walked up towards me.

“Th-Thank you... Mia.”

And just before reaching me, she took a 90-degree turn.

“It wasn’t me.”

“Princess Alfina. Um, for you to show concern to one such as me...”

“It was only decided upon today, but I’m still an official of the Academy Festival. I simply did what was befitting of my position. Besides, I wasn’t the one who negotiated...”

Lilka fidgeted about for a moment before standing in front of me.

“Um, Weinder, I didn’t mean to get you involved...”

“This time I kind of self-destructed on myself, so it’s fine. Seems like Mia’s always in your care anyway.”

Lilka looked completely surprised. That “Huh? You have a human heart?” reaction she gave me kind of hurt.

“More importantly, I want information on the Academy Festival. It’s suddenly been decided that I’m participating in it, for some reason.”

“For some reason? I’ve got quite a few things to say about that, but whatever. What do you wanna know?”

The energetic girl regained her usual attitude. She was the only one here with first-hand information about the Academy Festival, seeing that she had participated last year.

“Let’s see, then. First of all...”

“Wait, how long do you plan on making Her Highness stand in the hallway?”

“Clau.”

“Th-That wasn’t a complaint regarding Weinder. It was simply out of my duty to safeguard you, Your Highness.”

I thought she had become docile, but apparently some sort of restraint was placed on her behavior. I guess this was instigated by Euphylia or someone else. Judging from Alfina’s expression, I couldn’t brush her off by claiming our discussions were going to be commoner-exclusive. She seemed to have a lot going on with their boss, too. *I guess I’ll get some information on the student council while I’m at it.*

“Very well. Then let’s move over to a room where we can settle down and get our facts in order.”

*

We passed by the library’s entrance and turned the corner down the corridor. The director’s laboratory was locked. Which reminded me, Fulsig was grumbling about not wanting to go to a meeting. I took the key out of my pocket and opened the door.

“The key to the Great Sage’s room...? Who are you...?”

“It’ll be better if we’re closer to the slate board, so let’s use this desk.”

I pointed to a large research desk in front of the slate board on the wall.

Alfina sat in the center of the desk facing the board, and Claudia stood to the left of her lady. I sat directly across from Alfina, while Mia sat to my left. Lilka then headed towards the seat next to Mia in a fluster.

“Sorry for this, but it’ll be hard to talk to you there. Could I have you sit on the other side?”

I repelled Lilka from the commoner side of the table. This room was a fortress of science in this world. Logic dominated over social status here. Well, joking aside, Lilka looked at me in protest like she was about to cry, and Alfina held her palm out to the seat next to her. Lilka eventually managed her way to her seat with awkward movements. Her “how did it come to this?” face was something I could really sympathize with.

“If possible, I would also like for you to take a seat, Miss Claudia. We are

gathered here as fellow students in distress over the Academy Festival. I do believe that this applies to you as well, Madam.”

“Clau. There’s no need for you to be so on guard, is there?”

Claudia wavered for a moment, but ultimately sat down. The reason she was prioritizing this over her vigilance towards me was probably because of her discontent with the role pushed on her by her lady.

“So, let’s move on to my questions. To start, Torito, was it?”

“That sounds all stuffy, so just call me Lilka.”

“Oh, okay... So, Lilka, uhhh...”

What’s all this about? Well, it isn’t time for me to be worrying about that. Our opponents were big merchants, and the industry leaders in the business world. They had the backing of influential members of the student council. And faced with this headwind, I now had to set up shop at a festival that I had no plan for participating in. Furthermore, I had to do it somewhere nobody would go.

“For my first question, why are the Carlests going this far?”

The fundamental question here had yet to be resolved. I had at least heard what their official stance was, but it wasn’t enough to gauge their interests.

“Before we get to that, Weinder, you don’t understand the importance of putting up a shop at the Academy Festival. For a start—”

Lilka went on to explain the festival to me. Bearing the reputation of one’s house was an obvious point, but it also happened to be pretty much the only opportunity that companies got to appeal to such a large number of nobles all at once. It was also not all that strange for new goods to be announced at the festival, apparently.

So here in this rigid system, it was an endeavor to secure the minimal amount of social fluidity using the pretext of academics and its students. At least, that was probably the original intent.

The noble guests exchanged money for specially authenticated coins and used those for all payments. The reason it was managed so thoroughly was in order for them to be able to announce rankings based on the amount of coins earned.

A special coin... Maybe it's the one Fulsig showed me?

"I see, so it's more like a convention than a festival, huh?"

I was starting to get the slightest grasp of it.

"A what? Anyway, it's extremely important to all the mercantile students. Far more than any stupid test. You *are* more or less one of us, right, Weinder?"

"There's nothing 'more or less' about it; I'm a merchant. Well, I get the backdrop. But even with the traditional rules, you could secure better spots with more financial strength, which would harden your position. But is there really a need to spend such a large amount of money just so they can clamp down on that? If reputation is the important goal, isn't going too far going to have the opposite effect?"

"...This year is even more special. Come on, you know about it, right?" Lilka replied with a sour expression.

"...Something to do with the guild representative?"

This was just a bit awkward for me.

"Yeah. The Carlests and our parent company, the Kendalls, are both deputy representatives."

"All the more reason for restraint, then. From what you just told me, I can tell it will have an impact on the next representative, but it's still just a school shop, right? Won't they provoke animosity against themselves by being so overbearing?"

"You're right. Both us and the Dreyfans would've thought so as well. But the Carlests certainly don't. They're already the type to act tyrannically against small opponents. It feels like they lost all restraint after the Dreyfans vanished."

Lilka went on to explain things further. They heavy-handedly forced copper and silver companies under their umbrella, and used any trivial mistakes or times those companies were temporarily in the red as a reason for strengthening their dominance. Copper companies in particular were often made to get absorbed into their parent silver companies. There were even rumors of them using violence.

“That’s exactly why you have to be careful. Unlike silver companies, which are regular members of the Culinary Guild, coppers are just associate members, so...”

Lilka looked at me and Mia and trailed off. *I get it now. From what she’s telling me, they’re way worse than the Dreyfans.* The Dreyfans were at least fundamentally tolerant as long as you didn’t oppose them.

“So I suppose the Kendalls have a different objective, right?”

“Of course we do. We respect the independence of all our companies.” Lilka proudly boasted. “That’s enough explanation, right? I mean, it’s just been the two of us talking...”

Lilka looked at the two girls seated next to her.

“Please do not pay me any mind. I intended to learn just a little, but a talk between two fellow merchants truly is something else. The exchange between you and Ricardo has been quite enlightening, Lilka.” Alfina replied in a somewhat envious tone.

Please do be at ease, princess. The business knowledge you currently possess has already deviated quite far from the norm. Or perhaps ‘do be careful’ would be more appropriate.

“...Does this perhaps have some relation with what you spoke of with Louisa during the tea party? About the Empire looking to expand the trade of food?” Alfina asked.

“Y-Yes. That’s right.” Lilka’s eyes began darting about.

“It seems an imperial prince is going to be joining the next envoy. President Hilda had said that he is being invited to the Academy Festival as well.” Claudia absentmindedly joined the conversation.

“Is that so? As for any information beyond the envoy coming... We don’t...” Lilka replied.

“I’m sure the Carlests know. They’re more or less connected. If they become the guild representative, they could use the dissemination of the new trade rights to deal with any manner of discontent. That sound about right?” I

commented.

“Yeah. They’re probably thinking the same thing. They’re already in a superior position, so the Academy Festival is like the last leg.”

“I see. I’ve got a pretty good understanding of the situation now.”

The feeling that this was still just a school festival hadn’t completely left me, but my common sense on such topics wasn’t particularly trustworthy. *Now then, with our talk of the commercial world done, next is the noble world.*

“I have a question for you, Princess Alfina. What is it that ties the archduke’s daughter and the prime minister’s grandson together?”

“Sir!”

“Hey!”

Mia stomped on my foot and Lilka turned pale. Alfina also looked troubled.

“Oh, I guess I picked the wrong person to ask. Umm, could you answer me then, Miss Claudia?”

I heard Lilka mutter, “It’s not just the person you chose that’s wrong,” as I redirected my question.

“...”

“Please tell him, Clau. An assessment can’t be made without any information. Ricardo taught me so.”

“What on earth have you been... Very well. The daughter of the Archduke of the East, President Hilda, is Second Prince Delnicus’s fiancée, and the prince happens to be a member of the prime minister’s office.”

So the daughter of the archduke was tied to the second prince by engagement, the second prince was connected to the prime minister by his workplace, and here we had the grandson of the prime minister with her. In other words, they were all a part of the second prince’s faction.

“In short... How do I put it...? There’s a sort of connection being built between Lady Hilda and Princess Alfina. At least, to the masses...” Claudia added.

“It seems like the person in question harbors a whole lot of ill-will towards the

princess, though.”

Claudia became sullen as I mentioned that.

“In any case, that’s the situation.”

“...Thank you very much.”

Seriously, this academy really is a microcosm of the Kingdom. It’s quite ironic that it was all related to something I perpetrated, indirect as it was. I definitely wasn’t part of the third prince’s faction, though. Furthermore, it was quite likely that even the Empire was involved. Information that I didn’t want to know, but still had to know, just kept piling up.

Actually, I did want to know this. Intel on the relation between the Kingdom’s east and west, as well as anything regarding the Empire, that is. I needed an enormous economic bloc to establish the general trading company-like entity I was hoping to create in the future. However, at the current stage, I needed to quietly gather information without sticking out.

“Sir.”

Mia sent me a warning with her gaze. “Focus on the problem at hand,” or, more specifically, “Determine the problem to focus on,” I guess.

I’ve gotten a grasp of a fairly unpleasant reality. So, what extent of freedom do we have to act within? What resources do we have at hand? The amount of influence we have is quite small in reality. That’s because everyone here is still a student.

“I suppose that, for now, we should focus on how to make our shop succeed at the Academy Festival.”

This situation I found myself in came up from cutting in on a conversation about how an educational institution should have been behaving itself. As such, it was best to limit the information we were digging for to what we could hope to gather as students.

“Was there ever another choice?” Lilka quipped.

“The range of assumptions Ricardo makes is quite strange. This time around, we’re still on track. For now, at least.” Mia added.

“I won’t expand the scope any further this time. Anyway, I want to know about the currently allocated classrooms, as well as the spots that will likely be part of the next round of bidding.”

“Wait a sec. Before you worry about me, what do you and Princess Alfina plan to do about getting thrown out into the courtyard?”

“That’s what I need this information for. I want to judge whether the ‘shop’ I have in mind can be established here.”

The image that came to mind while we discussed this in the hallway would be an exorbitant form of business here. There were all sorts of problems in realizing its implementation.

“As if something so convenient actually exists... Whatever. Look at this.” Lilka spread out a roughly drawn map of the school on the table. “The ones labeled with numbers are the classrooms that have already been bid on. The cloakroom and waiting rooms for guests and such are here. All that’s left are small rooms like this one, or this one. So rooms like the preparation rooms for special classes, and the storerooms.”

Lilka pointed at rooms one after the other, all of which weren’t even half the size of the classrooms. There were even those less than a third of the size of the classrooms. The largest space was the auditorium, which the Carlests and Kendalls occupied the majority of. They were surely going to put on something quite extravagant there.

“Huh? The auditorium’s only being used on the last day?”

“What’s the point of having the golds compete directly with silvers?”

Lilka looked like she still had something she wanted to say. *Oh yeah, I guess there was a copper who directly confronted a gold, huh? It really was quite reckless. We ended up in this situation because of that.*

“How many participants seem like they’ll be left out?”

“Considering the numbers during the second round of bidding last year, there should be more than ten. With rooms this small, it’ll be over if we try to use any space for cooking. So it’ll be especially hard on those in the food business. Do you get it now?”

“On top of needing the work room in the back, the customers are all nobles, so the tables in the hall have to be properly spaced out, right?”

“Exactly. Last year we got a proper classroom, but still barely had enough room. The interior design is also a major problem.”

This academy was originally meant exclusively for the children of nobility. The classrooms themselves were one thing, but even the chairs and desks were all suitably luxurious. However, that wasn’t the case for other rooms. Even if the Academy was a gathering of the upper echelon of society, a storeroom was still a storeroom.

“What about cooking the food elsewhere and bringing it in like that?”

“That’s prohibited. The rules state that we have to present goods that have gone through the minimum amount of outside work to create, using only the space allocated to us.”

“Oh, but we can’t kindle fires in the classrooms, right?”

“There are ovens that use heated stones. We use those.”

“So you can cook?”

“We bring along cooks, duh. Being able to manage the process from beginning to end is where the students show their skills. However, there are some unclear bits as to how this is done among the independent groups. Especially those who deal in goods that require sophisticated techniques that they keep hidden, like confectioneries.”

There was a feeling that these students were being bullied by a large amount of capital, but all the participants for the festival are rich boys and girls. Incidentally, the artisan guilds were considered beneath the merchant guilds. Cooks fell under the former group.

“Okay, I’m starting to see the picture. You’ve been a big help, Lilka.”

“Wha—?! You’re far too ignorant, Weinder. S-So? What do you plan on doing? We’re able to secure rooms now, thanks to you, but it’ll still be really difficult for us. And you don’t even have a room. When you exclude the gazebos, the courtyard is just a dirt path between the school building and the

gazebos. What are you going to do without having a roof over your head?”

“You’ve been showing nothing but concern for Ricardo all this time, haven’t you, Lilka?” Alfina commented.

“Y-You’re wrong. The one I’m worried about is the one Weinder is abusing, Mia. Right?”

“I believed in my friendship with you up until now, Lilka, but my confidence is starting to fade.” Mia replied.

“Hey! What do you mean by that? Wait, I mean, the courtyard concerns you as well, Your Highness. Isn’t that why you wished to sit here with us?”

A lonely little cart in the middle of the courtyard. It truly painted a bleak picture. And then there’d be the arrogant noble lady looking down on that from the school building. *I don’t really mind being alone, since I’m a loner anyway, but having a shop stranded like that would definitely put us in the red. The sight of the princess and Mia being lonely in the courtyard would also be bad for my heart.*

So let’s change the scene that our little Hilda is looking down on, shall we? In a way that fulfills the assignment she gave us, that is.

“In short, we just have to liven things up in the courtyard and make it the main venue of the festival, right? I’ve got an idea.”

“How exactly do you plan on doing that with a single cart?”

Lilka looked at me like I was some shady salesman.

“Of course, it’ll be useless on our own. We’ll solicit help from fellow unlucky—I mean, from comrades who are willing to work with us. Could you tell me about the companies who are unable to participate, especially those in the food business?”

“I feel like the conversation is going in a weirder and weirder direction... Is this still fine, Mia?”

“We’re still above the boundary line.”

“Really? Umm, the ones under the Kendalls are the Toritos, meaning me, Shirley’s family—the Velminis—and the Rustons. As for the independent

companies, there's the Dargans, the Pluras..."

Lilka smoothly began enumerating names. The Kendalls' three companies dealt in dairy products, vegetables, and rare ingredients. Appropriate specialties for companies under the umbrella of the second largest company in the guild. As for the independent companies, they dealt in meat and confections. *It's looking good, isn't that everything I need?*

"They're all names I've never heard of, though..."

"They're all silvers, and way more famous than you are, Weinder. Just how little do you socialize here?"

"Well, a copper is treated as nothing more than an associate member, so..."

"Normally, you'd pay even more attention in that case."

Lilka glanced at Mia. It seemed Mia was also indebted to her regarding the same thing, so I was quite grateful that she was here.

"Why is a copper sending two students to the Academy, anyway? It's pretty weird when you think about it, right?"

"We got a hit on our first try with honey, is all."

"And with just one hit, you can become the princess's friend, and use the Great Sage's room however you want?"

"We're going off-topic. Putting together what we have so far, there's a way we can all get by."

I borrowed Lilka's map of the Academy and spread it out in the middle of the table.

"For our tenants... Let's see... We'll aim for these six rooms on the first floor."

"Aren't all these rooms tiny? Those are only a third the size of the classrooms. Also, they're pretty much all storerooms. The second floor is clearly a better choice."

She was entirely correct. The first floor was largely used for cloakrooms and waiting rooms, so there weren't all that many proper locations for a shop. However, there was no better choice when considering access to the courtyard.

“We won’t have guests in the rooms. Look, all six of these rooms face the courtyard. We’re going to do the cooking and arrangements for the food in these rooms, and then...”

I drew an ellipse with my finger over the courtyard.

“We carry them out to the guests waiting here. In short, we’ll create a guest seating area common to all shops.”

“Sharing the guests’ seats?!”

“The guests will order from various shops and sit in the courtyard. Then the shops will carry over what was ordered. For example, if you had two friends, even if they want to eat different things, they can each order what they want and eat in the same place. It’s got a festival feel to it, right? Furthermore, with six shops, there’ll be less wasted seating. And so, the Weinders will handle the management. That’s my ‘cart.’”

I listed out all my points before Lilka could object. She had a confused, “That’s not a cart, but what is it?” look on her face. If forced to answer one way or the other, it would be like one of those food courts run by large-scale commercial establishments in the other world. That was the foundation of my idea this time.

“My, it sounds so lively and fun, does it not?” Alfina said.

I actually did have a request for her with the precise goal of making it livelier. However, the little princess had been polishing her commoner sensibilities lately, so her intuition was fairly unreliable. Though in fairness, it had been fairly unreliable from the start.

“I would like to hear your opinion regarding this matter, Miss Claudia.”

“What will you do if it rains?”

Oof, she started with a tough one right off the bat. I drew a parasol on the slate board. Thinking of it as a connecting passage, we could create the bare minimum overhead coverage that we needed. If it were to come down too hard, though, we would just have to withdraw. Even if there were complaints, we could resort to using this room as a guest room.

It would work out one way or another with the sage's room. The courtyard was forced on me, but they didn't consider the trouble of dealing with rain. We could just tell the student council that we accepted the Great Sage's good will. For better or worse, that geezer was basically untouchable.

If it were to reach that point, I'd just have to take responsibility and cover for everyone. I didn't really care if I was disqualified. Besides, I planned on acquiring something of equivalent value from this.

"What will you do about chairs?"

"The shops need extra space to entertain the nobles, right? The classrooms should have plenty of spares. Lilka, your boss secured a portion of the auditorium too, right? Can't they hand some over?"

"Well... if we ask, it may work out one way or another."

"Alright. What else?"

"...Where do you plan on seating Her Highness?" Claudia asked.

"Hmm, I'd like you to create a management area for the courtyard around here... We're basically setting it up so the guests who come to greet Princess Alfina have to walk through our seating area."

"Do you plan on using the princess as a customer attraction?!"

"...All I need is for Princess Alfina to conduct herself as the supervisor of the courtyard. Nothing else. She doesn't need to recommend any shops."

"I'll be more than happy to if it's of any help. It may be a little hard on you though, Clau."

"No... If that is what you wish, Your Highness... Ricardo, that's all from me."

"Thank you, Madam. So, what do you think so far, Lilka?"

It was different from what I expected of her, but Claudia put some proper thought into her questions. *Now then, what's the opinion of our experienced participant looking down at the map in anxiety?*

"I've never heard of this being done before, but it certainly does solve the problem of space. Setting the table for dishes by overstepping the bounds

between shops and bringing them to seated customers waiting for it... There's a certain sense of novelty to the system itself. But... It's no good. There's still far too many problems."

Lilka stood up and walked to the window, then pointed at the courtyard.

"We're talking about the courtyard. Excluding the gazebos. Even if we carried tables and chairs over there, we'd need to make a seating area for those fancy nobles from scratch, right? We'll need a considerable number of umbrellas to cover it all as well. And we can't just put the chairs right on the ground. We need carpets of some sort. It's going to take significant funding to set all this up, you know?"

"We should be able to manage with the decreased venue fees. The tenants aiming for the second round of bidding will be emphasizing the size of the rooms. Interior design stuff, like tablecloths and napkins, well, those were always going to be a necessity anyway. As for the costs, the expense of the shared space will be split between all participants. It's meant to be used by everyone, after all. The total number of seats per shop will be less than a classroom, so it shouldn't add up to much."

"Even if there's enough money... Hmm, there's still no way you'll get unrelated companies to cooperate like that. The reputations of our houses are at stake. You'll never be able to..."

Oh, I get it. It's something like the western army led by Ishida Kazushige at Sekigahara. Not that I'd even reach Mitsunari...

"Just leave that part to me. I've got a plan for the form the investment will take."

This was actually the primary benefit for the Weinders. Let's say, for argument's sake, that I set up a shop and everything goes well. The Carlests and Hilda get a good scare out of it, but the practical merit for our company from this is practically non-existent. Actually, it's just a big demerit, seeing that we'll just be buying unwanted animosity.

I planned to use the Academy Festival as a testing ground to clean up the problem of our investment negotiations with Euphylia. At any rate, that inspector the archduchess sent me would be supervising the courtyard. It's fine if

she actually saw it for herself. Even if it would be difficult to run a test while doing real business, a shop at the festival was low risk and only runs for a limited time. It was just a school event, after all.

“The six companies will work under the jurisdiction of a temporary parent company and create a joint investment. Let’s see... How about we call it the Food Court Firm? The joint space’s management will be left to this firm.”

“So you’re saying the parent company isn’t making the children, but the children are gathering together to form the parent? That’s unreasonable. There’s no way they’ll settle together like that... There’s no way they should... Right?”

Lilka looked at me completely dumbfounded.

“That’s what the scheme for the investment system is for.”

“Investment...? Oh. Is this perhaps those stocks you were talking about before, Ricardo?” Alfina said, suddenly realizing what I was getting at.

“That’s right. Those same stocks.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Huh? Stalks? Vegetables again?”

There was now a wonderful split between myself and Alfina, and Claudia and Lilka. The two of them seemed to think we were talking about vegetables. I left the explanation entirely to Alfina and Mia.

Alfina explained the meaning of capital for business activities, while Mia explained how the practical financing worked. In short, if each company put out 10 gold and we had six companies, we would establish a company with capital funds of 60 gold. The ownership rights would then be divided by stocks. Lilka listened as her eyes darted about in confusion, while Claudia gave up on understanding halfway through.

“Setting aside Mia, why has Her Highness been studying this manner of...?”

“So that I can better understand Ricardo.”

Claudia and Mia’s gazes turned sour.

“Anyway. We take the enormous risk of creating a shared seating space, and divide it up in an easy to understand way between the participants.” I turned to Lilka and pressed her for an answer.

“...Ummm. I guess if the burden of expenses is equal, then with more customers for everyone, we’ll have more advantages. I think?”

“The Food Court Firm is an independent financier. They take rent from the participating stores in the form of stocks, and use it as proceeds for financing the food court. They then take the net income from seating after subtracting the expenses spent and divide it among the stockholders, matching the number of stocks from each store. The livelier the food court, the more profit it makes for everyone. The division of returns is fair and clear.”

Lilka fell silent. And after everyone waited for her answer for a while, she finally opened her mouth.

“Split up the risks, divide the profits in a clear way... Using the profits and risk to put all the scattered participants in order as a single entity... How?! It’s totally incomprehensible, but it kinda sounds like it makes sense, doesn’t it?!”

This was the system formed by corporate giants who spanned the entire world back on Earth, where far more enormous and complex economic activities took place. Since ownership had a direct connection to the risk and return borne from doing business, risk and return couldn’t easily be separated. This was the revolutionary concept that made it possible for total strangers to share risk and return.

Of course, without a strong backer and no way of guaranteeing the method, it would ordinarily be impossible to bring to fruition here. However, this time we’re just doing a mockup made up of students. It only had to hold out for a month at most. Moreover, we even had a common enemy to unite us. A house built on sand will still hold together somehow if given enough of a foundation.

It was said that stocks were conceptualized based on transatlantic trade. Back then, they had to square all their accounts in a single voyage.

“Got it. So what should I do?”

“I want you to go around and talk to the potential participants. That is, all the

students who got caught in this change of rules and have no choice but to cling to our pipe dream, whom you mentioned earlier.”

“All I can do is bring them to you, though.”

“That’s enough. Not a single one would come if I tried to call them, after all.”

“That’s really not something to boast about, you know?”

Lilka strained a smile. *Cut me some slack. That’s why I have to think of ways to rely on the system. Humanity develops by creating that which they do not possess enough of.*

“...As for borrowing chairs and tables, I’ll try to get the request through as soon as possible. I’ll at least make it in time before you explain this Food Court Firm of yours.”

“Much appreciated.”

This way we could accomplish one specific goal before trying to convince them. Just having the Kendalls show some form of cooperation would surely give some relief to any potential members.

“But even so, it’s not all that simple, okay? The independent companies are incredibly prideful. They’re not the type to jump at bait just ‘cause they’re in trouble.”

“Roger that. I’ll prepare a means to give the method a tangible shape for them to see.”

I glanced over to Mia, and my reliable secretary nodded. Her abilities were indispensable to accomplish the complex accounting work.

“What an interesting conversation. Do the mercantile students always speak like this?” Alfina asked in admiration.

“You’re mistaken, Your Highness. This guy is definitely not normal,” Lilka said with an exasperated expression. She then looked at Mia. “Far more outrageous than the Great Sage, huh? I get it now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just girl’s talk. You hear me? I’m kinda repeating myself a bit, but try and put

in some effort when persuading the others, okay? It won't be like today going forward."

"She's right, sir. They won't be as simple as the members we have here."

"I'm not simple!" Lilka objected as she pouted.

Chapter 8: Founding of the Food Court After shutting the door to the lab, I confirmed the participants in the room as I walked towards the slate board. We had five people, including Lilka. I think there was a total of ten companies which were choked out of getting a spot due to the sudden jump in real estate prices. It was the second of August. In just four days, Lilka managed to gather half of those companies. Even though two of them were under the Kendalls, it was still pretty impressive.

So this is the power of someone with a real social life? The duty of courting them from this point on belongs to me, the one with no such social life.

Lilka's gaze was quite stern, since I was guilty of messing up from the get-go. There were upperclassmen here as well, so coming in last despite being the one to call them here really was out of the question, I suppose.

It wasn't my fault, though. I popped into the director's office so that I could borrow this room, and got captured by the director, seeing that he had already created a theoretical model of the new antenna about the size of a teacup.

"I apologize for keeping you waiting. I met an unexpected delay while greeting the director in order to thank him for allowing us to use this room."

I couldn't really tell them that I was making preparations to deal with the next prophecy. I didn't come in from the hallway, but the director's office, so there was at least some credibility to what I was saying.

Aside from Lilka, the other four participants were magnificently scattered

around the room, sitting wherever they pleased.

A male student with a sturdy physique was sitting by the window in a lax posture. *That would be the third-year student who's the son of the Dargan Company.* The Dargans are apparently an independent company who deal in meat. His attitude seemed to be somewhat like that of a jock.

A slender boy was sitting by the entrance, not even looking my way as he combed his hand through his long hair. *That would be another third-year student.* He is the son of the Plura company, another independent company who manage a popular confectionery which serves commoners in the capital. His characteristic trait seemed to be his smugness. He gave off a somewhat artsy atmosphere.

A girl with glossy green hair and freckles was timidly sitting in the back of the room. This one was a classmate of mine; I had at least seen her face before. This is the same girl who witnessed the collusion between Dreyfan and Rowan in front of the library. She is apparently the daughter of the Velmini Company, which deals in vegetables. Just as her helpless gaze pointed at Lilka would imply, the Velminis are part of the Kendalls. I think Mia referred to her as Shirley.

As for the daughter of the Torito Company, Lilka, she was quietly sitting in the middle of the room, completely ignoring the distress signal from her classmate.

The last participant present was another boy, a classmate and the son of the Ruston Company, who deal in rare fruits and such from every region. He was sitting closest to the front, but his expression was stoic.

It didn't feel like any of them were happy to be here. That was perfectly understandable, considering they were all heirs of silver companies. Moreover, Dargan and Plura were the seniors here.

"I'm sure that you're all quite busy, so I'll begin explaining immediately."

I bowed lightly at the waist and began writing an organizational chart on the slate board. The details were the same as what I explained to Lilka and the others before. I outlined the creation of a shared space in the courtyard, as well as the stock system behind the temporary company that would handle it.

I could feel distrustful gazes piercing my back, but I focused on just quickly getting through the explanation. Not a single one took their leave. This wasn't because of my ability to explain things, but rather a result of how dire their current situation was.

"In short, everyone here puts in money, and we use that to gather customers in the courtyard, right?" Dargan nodded with rather large movements and then glared straight into my eyes. "And so, the one managing all that will be you, Weinder. Well, ain't that a nice setup?"

The athletic-looking butcher smiled and revealed his canines. *He's a rich boy from a far nicer house than mine... Right?*

"There are three companies here under the Kendalls. Wouldn't that make the actual mastermind Torito or Ruston? That would make you the figurehead. Your home is a copper, isn't it?" The somewhat high strung looking third year from a confectionery shop said.

Plura scowled at the remaining three participants. *I see, it looks like it really is true that the temperaments of the independent companies and those under an umbrella are different, even when they're all silvers.*

"I-I already gave up. I came along because Lilka insisted. But I really haven't heard of this sort of method before... I don't feel like it's really..."

The daughter of the vegetable store shot frequent glances at Lilka, but still stated her opinion. Lilka wasn't saying anything herself. It would be the worst-case scenario if the suspicion Plura just brought up that I was teaming up with the Kendalls to use the independent companies was given more credence.

"All of your concerns are reasonable. No matter how much I speak of it, I'm sure it won't carry any manner of persuasive power. I'll be moving on to a more tangible explanation of the Food Court Firm, so please judge its advantages and disadvantages for yourself."

I switched with Mia, and Lilka waved at her to cheer her on. *Weren't you supposed to be neutral?*

"I'll be explaining the specific numbers behind the seats which can be prepared in this space."

Mia began talking about the arrangements for seating using the data she got from Lilka about last year's festival. Dargan let out an impressed "Hmm" when she brought up the surplus tables and chairs the Kendalls offered, while Plura sneered with an "I told you so" look.

"In this way, with the minimum required expenses, we'll be able to prepare eight tables in the courtyard, summing up to 36 seats. That's about seven seats per shop. This would be about half of what a normal classroom could hold last year. Taking into consideration the decline of the ratio of vacant seats, it would mean that we're securing the equivalent amount of space as any classroom last year."

We did our own preliminary investigation of all the members here. They were surely thinking about how many seats they could prepare if they were on their own.

"Your calculations are off. Including you, there's six companies participating, right? That makes it six seats per shop."

"It's also doubtful that they'll be used fairly. What do you plan on doing if there aren't enough seats? If you're going to say that you get priority, then I have no reason to stick around."

Dargan brought up the numbers in discontent, and Plura agreed with him.

"We won't be selling anything in the courtyard," I said as I shook my head. "All we'll be taking on is the management of the space and taking a share corresponding to our investment. This will guarantee fair use."

"How splendid of you. I can't trust that. There's no equivalent merit at all for your company to be putting in any money, now is there?"

A sound recognition of the problem at hand. However, there was a merit for us. Thinking about it from my personal circumstances, I had something far more important to gain than building up my reputation. That said, however, it wasn't related to any of them, so I didn't mention it. Instead, I simply presented them with another fact.

"Frankly, this matter is a complete nuisance to us Weinders, since we were forced into participation by the Carlests and the student council. It's more than

enough for us if we meet the requirements of spending the bare minimum expenses to put up a shop in the courtyard.”

“But this is the Academy Festival. I simply cannot trust such a statement.”

“Then, answer me this. Is there any merit for me to appeal to noble guests at the Academy Festival? Let’s say that a copper company attracts the eyes of many nobles; do you think we could possibly maintain our business after that?”

“That... Well... You certainly have a point.” Plura yielded.

“Hmph, meaning you understand your social standing? If the nobles slap in a big order all at once, you can’t refuse them. It’s quite frankly a full-on nightmare to get buried in huge orders without the goods to fulfill them,” Dargan added.

Even if a small enterprise invents something revolutionary, they’ll be unable to scale their production to an unrestrained number of orders. Sooner or later, a larger corporation will steal the marketplace with a substitute product. The burden of desperately trying to keep up with production will then crush them. Even back in the other world, there was plenty of precedent for this. It was even more prominent here, given the productivity and logistical standards of this world. There was at least a reason for the structure of the membership clubs known as the guilds.

But strictly speaking from the perspective of the Weinders, we were planning to deal with this through the expansion of our honey production output. It was for this reason that we needed to finish our negotiations with the archduchess regarding her investment. That was why we needed to put on this stage show—so that we could demonstrate the power of the stock system.

There was actually more than just that. This Food Court Firm would in fact be a pseudo-company made up of different companies. You could more or less call this experiment a version of my future objective, the general trading company. There were so many benefits to this that I practically felt guilty about it. *I’m not going to say that I’ve leveled up from a rude junior to an obsessive-compulsive megalomaniac, though.*

The two upperclassmen began thinking it over in silence before chiming in.

“I get what you’re saying. Honestly, being able to secure guest seating is a

huge boon. I won't argue that you seem to specialize in management, either. There's an easy to understand facet of it with everyone being given equal rights through the investment capital as well."

"It's quite unpleasant to have such barbaric meat dishes and plain vegetables placed at the same seats as my delicate confections, though. But... It's certainly true that having no seats at all is out of the question... Tch, if only the Carlests didn't take things so excessively far..."

"*Barbaric* meat dishes...?"

"V-Vegetables aren't plain..."

Just when Dargan began frankly opening up to the group, Plura provoked him and took a prod at Shirley while he was at it.

"...I'll agree to this," Ruston said.

"I also have no objections. We can't just shut ourselves in and ignore the Carlests' tyranny, right?" Lilka added.

Aptly put. Having a common enemy is the best support we can have in such a situation. Lilka's statement put a stop to the other three's little quarrel.

"But is it really okay to create such a big thing all on our own like this? I'm betting there's no precedent for it at all," Dargan asked.

We were now talking under the premise that the establishment of the Food Court Firm was a determined fact, meaning all business-related decisions had been made. *It looks like we're ready over there too, so the timing is just right.*

"The one who told me to set up a shop in the courtyard was the student council president herself. Furthermore, we have received the permission of Princess Alfina, who is the supervisor for the courtyard."

"Really?"

"A copper laid the groundwork with the princess... How...?"

"Hey, Lilka, should we really be working with this person?"

The room was stirring. Ruston was the only one just staring me down, as if he were measuring my capabilities. I stood up and headed for the door to the

director's office. After opening it, I signaled my classmate in the other room. The newbie official of the student council then entered the room with a calm, relaxed, and refined pace.

"Your Highness!"

Everyone rose to their feet and bowed at the sudden entrance of the royal princess.

"Princess Alfina, these are the potential participants of the Food Court."

"My, so these ladies and gentlemen will be the ones setting up shop in the courtyard?"

Alfina smiled in a truly delighted manner. It didn't look anything like an act. Not like it could ever be an act with her.

"This is my first time serving as an official for the Academy Festival, so I may be somewhat unreliable, but I look forward to working with all of you."

The princess's words made the members feel even more obliged, and they all bowed even further.

"Now then, can I assume that all members here will be participating in the Food Court Firm?"

After Alfina returned to the director's office together with Fulsig, I cut to the chase.

"...If you're saying we're gonna do it, then I guess I've got no other choice. I'm not gonna grumble about it now that it's settled. Relax."

"Hmph. I'm in."

"—Acknowledged."

"G-Got it. I mean, even the princess came out and all, right?"

The four of them consented, each with a different expression.

"Okay, then let's put some spirit into the bidding. Let's give it to the Carlests!" Lilka led the charge into the next topic.

"Not like there's gonna be any competition for these tiny rooms."

“Hmph, it’s barely adequate for my shop, but I suppose there’s no helping that.”

“With a small shop, even if we fail, the losses will be minimal... Err, but failing in front of Her Highness would be rather...”

The members all leaned over the rough map of the school and began talking about the next round of bidding, conspiring to haggle down the prices of public utilities. In a sense, this was collusion.

With this, I cleared the first hurdle of evading being a loner in the courtyard. The next problem was going to be the student council’s attitude towards us, as well as the Carlests. Fortunately, they were under the belief that we’d all fail, and surely didn’t even have us in their field of vision. However, what would they do once they became convinced we were going to succeed? The main point was predicting the timing with which they’d start being wary of us. *Maybe I could make use of that marketing plan based on a certain theory...*

Here it was summer break, and yet I’d just been spending it walking tightropes. Furthermore, this time the tightrope was being traversed by a whole group of people at once. Well, best to consider it an improvement over last time, when I had the entire western Kingdom walking with me.

Chapter 9: Discussions Before Taking the Stage

I clutched my stomach, aching from the stress, as the participant who remained a little further back from the rest of the group came over to me. It was Ruston, the one who spoke the least. I actually had a great deal of interest in his business.

I was curious about how he could turn a profit given the economic structure here, seeing as he apparently dealt in rare fruits and delicacies. That also meant he must have possessed information on each region of the Kingdom.

“...Got a minute?”

Ruston pointed to the corridor, and I nodded back at him.

“Whoa.”

As I came out into the hallway, I just about bumped into Alfina’s maid.

“Princess Alfina has already returned together with Miss Claudia.”

“...Thank you for informing me.”

Alicia bowed and replied courteously in such a formal manner that even I could tell it was a façade. She then checked inside the room from the door before heading to the school’s exit. When judging others, actions speak louder than words. This was a prime example of that.

“...She’s the first year who serves as the princess’s maid, right? Does she dislike you?”

“Isn’t it because having someone like me nearby lowers the status of her lady?”

I tried to steer the conversation away from overvaluing myself...

“...That just shows how large an existence you are to Her Highness.”

But I failed. My words were powerless before Alfina’s innocent trust.

“So? What do you need, Ruston?”

“...I just have one question.”

“Go ahead. However, depending on the details, it could cost you.”

“...It does happen to be related to what we were talking about.”

“Then isn’t it better to go back inside and talk about it in front of everyone else?”

I held my palm back out to the door. I had the responsibility of explaining anything regarding the Food Court to the others. The fact that he went out of his way to have a conversation in private meant that this wasn’t what this was about.

“...Why did you not use the princess’s name from the beginning? Irrespective of you being a copper, that would have settled things immediately. It should’ve been far more advantageous a situation for you.”

“It’s troubling when you phrase it like I’m capable of manipulating her, though...” I didn’t expect this question and was a little troubled as to how to answer. “After all, even if I were to use the authority of some big shot to forcibly bring everyone into the fold, I won’t be able to buy a merchant’s sense for profit or their will as a concerned party.”

I also wanted Alfina to enjoy the Academy Festival in a natural way, even if just a little, but this probably wasn’t what Ruston was asking about. This was about merchants and nobles; the relationship between private businesses and politics. The Kendalls’ stance, and his question itself, were hints as to why he would ask such a thing.

“...Got it. Then, let us start over. Will you come with me? There’s someone I want you to meet.”

Ruston nodded slightly, then pointed to the other side of the building before silently walking away. I followed along, without any other choice to take. After exiting the building, I thought we were headed to the courtyard, but we passed

by it without stopping. We ended up going all the way to an auditorium near the school gate. If my memory served me right, this was the hall that the Carlests and another large company were using for the festival. *I have a bad feeling about this.*

We entered the auditorium, and there were several people inside who were clearly outsiders. All of them had armbands on, indicating that they had permission to enter the premises. The one standing at their head was a male student. He had curled chestnut hair, and a somewhat childish face, giving him a refreshing sense of handsomeness. This was an upperclassman I hadn't met before.

"How'd it go?"

"...Black. And he passed," Ruston replied.

"So it really was true..." The upperclassman said with a bitter smile and nodded. "Let's start with introductions, then. I'm Jean, the eldest son of the Kendall Company. I want to talk with you."

In other words, this was Lilka's boss. Not only did he yield tables and chairs to us, three of his child companies were involved in our enterprise. He certainly was somebody that I had to at least exchange formal greetings with.

"The Ruston Company has served a secondary role as the Kendalls' intelligence branch for generations now."

This was easy to accept. That's because it didn't seem possible to make a profit from selling rare foodstuffs here. Using a silver company as an intelligence branch was quite a luxury for this gold company to spare.

Jean pointed over to the stage further within the auditorium. My battlefield this time was to be an empty courtyard, so I didn't really feel like marching onto a big stage.

"To begin, I suppose I have two things that I must thank you for. First is for what happened before, and the second is for what is to come."

"Please leave what's to come to me. Besides, you are the one lending us chairs and tables for the courtyard, so doesn't it balance out?"

I didn't hate his stance on putting an emphasis on intelligence gathering. That's only if I wasn't the one in his crosshairs, though. Also, the thing that happened before wasn't for the Kendalls' sake. I just happened to use the Kendalls, nothing more.

"So you're saying that the favor of a gold company of the Culinary Guild is unnecessary..."

"It's far too large a connection for a copper. It feels like it would be impossible for us to handle correctly."

It didn't really compare to a princess or archduchess, but it was still at a level where it was troublesome to handle.

"How tough."

"...It seems there's no need to beat around the bush. His thoughts and actions are so fast that it'd be unthinkable from the perspective of common sense," Ruston said to Jean.

"Got it. Let me get straight to the point. Could you perhaps put me in touch with Archduchess Berthold?"

"I won't," I replied immediately.

I was just barely making it by in our negotiations with Euphylia as it was. I didn't want to create any sort of unnecessary debt.

"So you're not saying you can't."

"You're one to talk. It's not something you can say to her yourself, right?"

The Kendalls were a gold company, moreover, one that set up its main base of business in the west. Now that the Dreyfans had been overthrown, they weren't an existence that Euphylia could just ignore. *I know that they can't move openly, but they should choose their connections better.*

"Even if I were to say that upon becoming the guild representative, we promise to promote you to a silver company?"

"Don't make me repeat myself. We wouldn't be able to handle it correctly. I'm not going to stock up on merchandise I can't sell when it's so heavy and bulky. That's because the storage cost for this is stupidly high. Also, I don't find

making empty promises to make people take action very admirable. How exactly do you plan on becoming the guild representative?"

"..."

"..."

We stared each other down in silence. I could hear Ruston gulp behind him. *Now then, how will this rich boy of a golden company reply?*

"Let's say it isn't an empty promise. What would you want?"

"Ruston. I'd like you to pay me back right now. Why was it that Jean ordered you to ask me that question?" I faced my classmate, and Jean answered for him.

"Very well. Allow me to explain, beginning from our plan. First, the Kendalls do not fundamentally bind others strongly under our umbrella or to guild membership. We cooperate as a group when it is efficient to do so, but all actual business is left to each company independently, since those dealing with the village peasants happen to be the people from said companies. Incidentally, in the guild, they refer to the two deputies as the Vertical Carlests and the Horizontal Kendalls."

I see, so it's something like hierarchical commercial affairs, and cooperative ones. Independence... huh? Judging from how they aren't directly helping Lilka and the others for the Academy Festival, it seems he isn't lying.

"Which do you prefer?" he asked.

"Each has their own advantages and flaws, so it doesn't matter to me as long as it goes well. But I guess that's being a little vague. Well, strictly speaking in terms of taste, I would prefer the Kendalls' way. We're quite small, after all."

"I'm honored you think so. But that stock system you proposed... That isn't a form of contract that either system can adapt to flexibly, is it now? It would only be possible if you were to mix the two to an extent. Is this right?"

"Who knows? This is just a game among students. Besides, this time we have a common goal, or more specifically, a common enemy. Also, it's limited to the duration of the festival. If not for that, this wouldn't be manageable."

Practically speaking, if the Carlests hadn't cornered them to the point that participation was impossible, this little scheme would have never taken form.

"No matter the system, it will eventually crumble without the profit and abilities to support it. And the more complicated the system, the bigger the collapse. Even bearing that in mind, though, I find your idea very interesting. But let's get back on track. We have no intention of being glued to a noble. Not in the way the Dreyfans courted them all equally, and not in the way the Carlests are stuck to a specific big shot. At most, nobles are guests with loose tongues. That's our stance on things."

"Nobles who plant their roots in one region are different from merchants who plant their roots in the flow of money, after all." I honestly replied.

The two weren't equal. It was inevitable that this was inconvenient as a practical matter.

"We're merchants, and merchants have their own path to follow."

Jean narrowed his gaze and smiled. I couldn't let down my guard, but it seemed I could get through to him more than I could with Dreyfan.

"Now that we know where we all stand, let's move on to the negotiations. My desire is victory in the next guild representative election."

I knew that much, but he really was being upfront about it. However, I wasn't in a position to answer his desire. Why? Well...

"Can I ask you something first? How does the guild representative get decided, anyway?"

I knew next to nothing about the guild representatives. I only knew that they were decided through the recommendation of a grand noble.

"...Here you are planning something utterly outrageous, and yet you don't even know something so basic...? The recommendation of a grand noble is but the first step."

Jean went on to explain things, even while astonished at the ignorance of his junior. The guild representative election was held in two stages. The first stage was, in layman's terms, a preliminary election within the guild. Votes were

taken from the regular members of the guild, silver companies and above, and the companies which passed a certain threshold, about one-third of all members, were chosen as candidates.

The second stage was an endorsement conference held at the royal palace. In other words, the final election. Guild representatives received the title of an honorary noble. Even though their new title of nobility was purely a formality, this still fell under the king's jurisdiction. The king then appointed a representative based on the endorsements of the grand nobles. In this case, this would be the archdukes and dukes, so it truly was something decided upon at the highest level.

"So you really didn't know..."

Not like a copper has any voting rights, so why would I worry about it?

"Although, up until now, the Dreyfans have been the sole candidate and always made it through like that. Last time, the Kendalls didn't even make it through the preliminary election."

So it really was just a front. That makes it completely hereditary.

"Frankly speaking, without a recommendation, it'll be impossible to gather the votes to make it through the preliminary election. It literally wouldn't be a competition. So I'd like a connection to Archduchess Berthold."

"Allow me to decline once more."

"...Just as I said, the Kendalls have no intention of gluing ourselves to a noble. However, to become the guild representative, we require the recommendation of a grand noble, no matter what. Moreover, we need one who can compete with Archduke Kurtheight, who will surely endorse the Carlests. I do believe Archduchess Berthold wouldn't welcome the idea of Archduke Kurtheight accumulating even more power."

"Probably not, but my answer won't change."

"Your reason?"

"If it came to a direct confrontation between the archdukes, isn't your defeat already determined?"

Let's say, for argument's sake, that the power relationship between the Carlests and the Kendalls was currently 40 to 10. Of the Carlests' 40, 25 of it was made up of Archduke Kurtheight's power. Now let's add 20 to the Kendalls, assuming they got Archduchess Berthold's power. That would still end up as 40 to 30. It would look like they closed the gap a great deal, but they had nothing to bridge it completely beyond this one strong hand to play.

As a result of getting involved in the ongoing conflict between the east and west, everything would still be tilted completely to one side. If the Archduchess of the West were to then become an enemy due to a breakdown, it would be even more skewed towards the other side.

"In this case, I do believe the largest hand you can play is not necessarily the best. Don't you think so too?"

"...You have a point. However, there is no other hand to play... Though from the sound of things, you seem to be suggesting there is in fact another hand available?"

Jean made a request for my Plan B. *I'm fairly estranged from the political climate of this world, though, so I can't say I'm certain.*

"I'm still refusing to help, and I'm not all that certain of this myself. But the one the Kendalls should be getting in touch with isn't the Archduchess of the West, or any other nobles from the east or the west. You should be contacting one from the center, right?"

"...You mean Duke Aleberg?!"

Jean mumbled to himself, "What a blind spot." *That's probably the duke I'm thinking of, not that I've ever heard his name.*

"What do you think, Ruston?"

"...Duke Aleberg is a famed hobbyist who practically never takes proactive action. He holds lands close to the capital, and is neutral in his political stance to match the location of his territory. Of course, he doesn't possess enough power to compete directly with Archduke Kurtheight, but..."

"That in itself isn't enough, but with just that, we have the margin to play our next hand..."

I didn't have the time to even ask who Duke Aleberg was. I simply stated my thoughts based on the structure of the Kingdom.

"Let me tell you now, but I don't care who comes after this."

I decided to, at most, focus on the Academy Festival. *Well, it's gotten a little scary after listening to all this, so I guess I'll take just a few more measures to preserve myself.*

"Those under the Kendall umbrella and the independent companies will cooperate loosely to succeed at the Academy Festival. Just as the Kendalls wish, we may be able to sway the opinions of the members of the Culinary Guild with that. If we can appeal to the benefits of the Horizontal Kendalls, it should be of some use."

"Do you truly believe you'll be able to liven things up at that much?"

"Who knows? I'm just saying that if we're able to, you're free to make use of it, is all."

"It seems there will be a need to pay suitable compensation for this. Let me ask you once more, what is it that you want?"

"Information. Even as the deputy representative of the Culinary Guild, I'm sure you have information on the circumstances of agricultural production in the Kingdom. I want to know the production output for wheat in each agricultural region, as well as the price of wheat. I'd prefer relative values over actual numbers. But at the very least, let's see... I want the last ten years of transactions."

In a certain sense, this demand was so unreasonable that it was somewhat like stripping the Kendalls naked.

"That's quite the outrageous request you've made. Isn't that something you should be asking Archduchess Berthold for?"

"I want information from the people connected to the production sites themselves, that is, people like you, who have felt the sense of such transactions on your own skin."

I was looking for first-hand information. If I were to match that with

Euphylia's information, the general census, I'd be able to estimate the production output of every agricultural region.

"Your reason?"

"I won't go into too much detail, but it's because there's a possibility that the social structure of the Kingdom from here on out will bring about major profits and burdens. The price of wheat is under pressure to be lowered, isn't it?"

I looked into Jean's shocked eyes as I replied. I had a rough sense of things from my analysis of the last disaster.

"Are you truly a copper? This is quite a loss of face for me," Jean said as he smiled bitterly.

"...This is due to my deficiencies in gathering intelligence. I sincerely apologize," Ruston added with a dry laugh.

"That manner of information will be difficult to release at my own discretion. I'll have to discuss it with my father. However, I will give it my all. It seems like it'll be dangerous to be put in your debt. However, let's see..." Jean suddenly grinned. "I suppose we should celebrate having been brought a connection on level with Archduchess Berthold."

"You overestimate me. If our relations are to continue, you'll surely have the opportunity to amend that opinion one day."

Chapter 10: Promotion Plan

“We got all the rooms as planned. Everyone managed to pin down the ones on the first floor that we were aiming for.”

“I mean, nobody even contested us. They’re all *just* storerooms, after all.”

“Everyone was looking at us like we were idiots... At least we managed to cut down on expenses...”

“...”

Three days had passed since the meeting. Not a single member failed in their goal during the second round of bidding, and we gathered once more within the (temporary) Food Court Operational Headquarters, the director’s laboratory. Not that the Weinders had to participate in the bidding, seeing that we were given the courtyard as a special exception. But everything was going smoothly so far.

“Three rooms in the right building, two in the left. We’ve got all the right positions for surrounding the planned area of the Food Court,” Lilka said.

The schematics of the academy drawn on the slate board had the names of each company written around the courtyard in the middle, and an empty space in the courtyard was circled by a dotted line. *Now then, it’s time to show my — or perhaps, our — skills to demonstrate what kind of “cart” we can create here.*

“So? What do we do next?” Lilka asked, as if representing everyone else.

“I do believe that all of you have problems in mind regarding the Food Court. Could each of you tell me about them?”

I had confidence in the idea itself. It did come from the evolution of business based on the ideas of an uncountable number of people on Earth. However, we were trying to establish something in an entirely different world with an entirely different environment. There was a practical need for the senses of the members here who knew of the Academy Festival.

“Those prideful nobles won’t sit down just from the curiosity of having chairs put out there. And even if they do, how do we take their orders?”

“He’s right. Having so many shops in one place also makes it difficult to choose anything.”

Dargan started the debate, and Plura continued after him.

“We’ll have waiters from each shop going around, right? Leaving the explanation for our goods to people from other shops is rather...”

“...Y-Yeah. If they explain things in a weird way, they won’t understand the charm of our vegetables...”

Lilka and Shirley also chimed in.

At this rate, it would just become a disorderly mob. Both the shops and guests would be lost in utter confusion. The problem of waiters moving around the Food Court in particular was something that had completely slipped my mind.

“...At this rate, it would be safer to just do business individually in the same space.”

The taciturn Ruston added his own input. This point had to do with the way I spoke big and criticized Jean the other day.

“There’s a need to be able to inform our guests at a single glance what’s so enjoyable about this gathering of shops that they had never seen before. That’s what you mean, right?”

In other words, we needed some sort of promotional good. It was a far bigger problem than the physical restriction of space we had.

I went over the plan that I had prepared in my head again. After adjusting the order of priorities for each problem that originally slipped my mind in accordance with the feedback I had just received, I settled on a valid means to resolve them all.

“I have one idea. I want each of you to prepare your specialty dishes for the next meeting. But please adhere to this format.”

Mia handed out papers to each member. These weren’t recipes; they were specifications for the sizes of the dishes we wanted each of them to prepare. We also requested that the color of each dish be adjusted so that it didn’t overlap with the others.

“The Dargans sell meat, ya know? We brought out a whole roast last year.”

“Meat will do. How about sliced roast beef?”

“I mean, there ain’t enough food to be satisfied with such a stingy portion.”
Dargan folded his arms and voiced his discontent.

“We’re selling a confection topped with colorful fruits and placed on a white mousse. If the portions are bite-sized, they won’t bring out the flavor.”

“Please have the toppings focused on a single point. Oh, and if you’re going with white, try to keep the cost in mind.”

“We can’t do bite-sized portions with salad... They’ll just think the vegetables are boring. Maybe we can harden some vegetables into an aspic or something... But then there’s the issue of managing the stock...”

“The only thing we can put out with this request is a single egg. I’ll do it if you say so, Weinder, but I can’t overlap with Plura’s white dish...”

“Please, just prepare these, regardless of whether it seems like I’m deceiving you or something. I can also use this to confirm the specialties of each of your shops before actually handling the management of the Food Court, right? Besides, we’re running out of time.”

I somehow got the five members before me to agree. The Academy Festival started at the end of August. We only had a little more than two weeks left. If all went well, this would become the centerpiece of the Food Court. It was a setup to both attract customers and appeal to the goods of each company. And at a single glance, too. However, there was still a need for us to play one more hand.

“Ruston.” I called out my silent classmate.

“...What is it?”

“There’s a certain fruit I’d like you to procure. I found it while investigating some books in the archive right before summer break... Are you able to get this?”

I showed Ruston the name of the fruit I jotted down on a memo.

“...I’m surprised you know of something this uncommon.”

Ruston looked at me in wonder. *That's my line. I mean, it doesn't seem all that useful in the Kingdom's culture.*

Chapter 11: Edible Menu

“The quality is better than I imagined.”

Back in the repurposed laboratory, the Food Court Operational Headquarters, I had five trays set in front of me. Cute little dishes of every shape and color sat atop each tray, brought here by our participants. However, the people I was complimenting had mixed feelings about it.

“The taste is a sure thing. But ya know, there ain’t enough meat to chew on like this.”

Regardless of the small portion of Dargan’s roast beef, the gradation from the charred edges to its red center was marvelous.

“...I somehow or other got this together with the vegetables we can use this season... But it really isn’t enough...”

Shirley brought something like a vegetable aspic that she didn’t seem terribly confident in. It was a rectangular hardened block with carrot-like orange, papaya-like yellow, turnip-like white, and asparagus-like green chunks in it.

“Please don’t consider such a plain dish to be representative of my skills.”

Plura’s dish, which he was practically sighing at, was a confection with white mousse and small berries on it. The fact that he went out of his way to make it donut-shaped, even though it was bite-sized, gave off a sense of his pride.

“He’s got a point. Any male guests will definitely finish this in one bite.”

Lilka looked at her yellow pudding while measuring it out with her thumb and finger. It looked like there was an ample amount of cheese kneaded into an egg yolk.

“...”

Ruston simply looked over the baguette kneaded with small nuts in silence. Thanks to that, I had no idea what nuts they were. From what I could see, they were similar to walnuts.

All of our members looked discontent and anxious in front of their bite-sized

dishes. It really did look unreliable from the standards of luxury food here in this world. What had Shirley especially anxious was how light seasoning seemed insufficient for something this size.

“There’s such a thing as a suitable size for cuisine, so that it can be properly tasted. Perhaps a copper like yourself would not know this.”

“You don’t plan on using these as a sampler or something, do you? I’m pretty sure the nobles will just think you’re taking the mickey out of them. They’re nothing like those commoners who’ll jump at the offer of free stuff, ya know?”

My two upperclassmen were thinking that I made some sort of fatal misunderstanding. *Such is my household, I guess. I did in fact consider a sampler, but in the end, I rejected the idea myself. So forgive me for that.*

“No, this is fine.”

I looked over the five dishes of every color and nodded. I then received a white plate from Mia and began arranging the bite-sized dishes atop it.

The first thing I placed closest to me was Shirley’s four-vegetable aspic; I placed Lilka’s pudding adjacent to it. Together, they were something like the salad and the appetizer.

I cut Ruston’s baguette into small triangular slices and put three of them on the left to match up with the rest. Of course, I stood them up against each other to give it a sense of height. The colors on the dish multiplied with my every move.

Now for the main dish. I arranged the roast beef in the center of the plate like a rose. The color of meat instantly filled up the rest of the plate. And finally, I put the white mousse, which matched the plate’s color, to the back. The color of the small berries was brought to the fore.

As each color and shape was added to the plate, our members began pitching forward more and more.

“This will be the Food Court’s highlight menu item, the one-plate lunch.”

I spoke before my collage of cuisine. The other members remained silent. Rather than rejecting or accepting the idea, they were just kind of bewildered.

Take a determined product and create it in mass— that’s the fundamental thought behind manufacturing. The acquisition of materials and all processes up to the product’s sale are standardized to reduce risk. In the modern manufacturing world, the basic theory is to mass-produce as few varieties of goods as possible for as long as possible. The fundamentals of this are the same for foods which can’t be manufactured as industrial goods as well.

In truth, Shirley did mention her anxieties in managing an inventory for the different kinds of vegetables she had. Losing even one type would render her dish unfeasible, which really showed the risks of the storage and transportation technologies here. The extent of complexity that could be managed in this world was quite narrow.

Consequently, luxury goods here tended towards larger portions without a need for such risks; stuff like thick steaks and layered cakes. At noble banquets, they would go even further and line up such dishes which focused on size to produce a luxurious spectacle, somewhat like a full course banquet.

That was, in fact, luxurious even by the other world’s standards. However, back on Earth, where food could be so abundant that obesity was a problem among the masses, there was an entirely different form of luxury.

From a manufacturing standpoint, it’s the exact opposite approach: produce a large variety of small portions. It’s a paradigm born from a world of abundance. That’s the trigger for my idea this time. The fact that this one-plate lunch didn’t form a direct connection in me to restaurants back on Earth somewhat shows my standards of living while I was there.

A merchant should have been able to understand this. Lining up all sorts of different dishes into one plate had a different impact from sheer size. It was an entirely different form of luxury.

“What’s this? It’s so cute!” Lilka spontaneously yelled.

“Amazing, it’s like a painting on top of the plate. I’ve never seen a dish like this before.” Shirley added.

This was the first time I heard Shirley speak so clearly. And beckoned by the two girls’ voices, Dargan suddenly raised his head.

“That ain’t all. This could also be considered a menu, right, Weinder?”

Dargan grabbed my shoulder. *You’re putting too much strength into your hand, dammit! That hurts...*

“...A menu?” Ruston asked.

“That’s right. Look, we’ve got the specialties of each shop lined up here, but the portion is still small enough that it makes you want just a bit more.”

“...So the guests who eat this will order more of what they like from the individual shops?”

Ruston came to an understanding from what Dargan said. In any case, he looked like a complete meathead, but he really had it together up there. I guess that was to be expected from the future proprietor of a company. *But I would at least like him to stop crushing my shoulder.*

He was exactly right. This was a combination platter meant to stimulate the appetites of our customers. Furthermore, it served as an introduction to the main specialties of each shop. It was an edible menu.

“An edible painting and a menu... I’m somewhat displeased at how the main attraction of the dessert is sitting in the back, though...” Plura still seemed to have complaints, but at least he wasn’t rejecting the idea anymore.

“It’s certainly an amazing concept. It’s both pretty and refined, so the young noble ladies will likely accept it, but...”

“Mm, we’re serving all this at once...?”

Now that the visual impact had settled down, Lilka looked somewhat worried as her eyes began wandering over the food on top of the dish. Shirley also started getting anxious right next to her.

“Let’s try eating it first.”

Well, let’s answer any doubts by verifying the taste. All the merits so far were promotion related. However, the main priority of this still had to be its quality as cuisine. Everyone stretched their hands towards the plate and took a bite of everything in toothpick-sized portions.

“Each individual dish is good, but it’s not enough. I guess that’s fine, though,

since it's kinda the point..." Dargan commented.

"Since we're quickly moving from dish to dish, the tastes conflict with the palate." Plura added.

"Our vegetables have no presence..." Shirley muttered anxiously.

Standing before the now-empty plate covered in sauce from each dish, everyone calmly voiced their opinion.

Back in my student days, I'd done something similar; I bought a bunch of side dishes from the supermarket and lined them up on the table of my cheap apartment as a full course meal. It wasn't anywhere near the definition of luxury, though. I just had croquettes, fried chicken and such with half-price seals on them. Setting that aside, I did take one thing away from doing that: lining up a bunch of ready-made dishes does not a full course meal make.

Naturally, what we had here weren't side dishes. They were all the specialty goods of each company. No wonder the individuality of each one backfired as a whole. It's possible that they could compensate for this using their abilities. However...

"We should suppress the taste of the meat a little more. It's obstructing the delicate taste of my mousse."

"Au contraire. Your mousse is just too damn rich."

"The tastes of the aspic and pudding don't conflict, though."

"...Mm. I guess it's the texture or something? They kinda overlap."

It wasn't easy to reconcile. If anyone here were to deny their own specialty, the Food Court would shatter into pieces like a fallen plate.

Right, let's just have everything join together with a neutral entity. I made a request of the one in charge of the baguette, who was staying out of the conversation, to hand me my secret weapon.

"Did you bring what I asked for?"

"...It lacks acidity when compared to a lemon, and the scent is also quite plain, just so you know," Ruston said as he handed me a small yellow fruit.

I actually found it rather amazing that he was able to procure this on such short notice. Mia began arranging another one-plate lunch atop a clean plate, as I cleaved the small rugged fruit in two with a knife. I then dribbled a few drops of juice from the fruit on top of everything on the plate. The nostalgic scent of a faint sourness tickled my nose.

“How’s that gonna change anything?”

“Please have a taste.”

“Huh? It’s somehow easier to eat now. Is it just from the scent? It’s not even that strong.”

“Certainly... It’s lacking compared to a lemon, but it’s also that much more refreshing. This is quite...”

All four of them looked at the taciturn schoolboy.

“It’s a fruit called junos; one that we handle on extremely rare occasions.”

Back in the other world, it would be called citrus junos, or yuzu. Both its taste and scent were quite refreshing. It bore a remarkable resemblance to the yuzu I’d had in Japan. I found it by coincidence in the archive and had only jotted down a memo about it at the time, but it came in handy at quite an unexpected time.

“A whole sense of unity popped up outta nowhere.”

“Normally, we would be adding lemon to our mousse. There’s no mistake in that choice, but thinking of it from the perspective of this plate as a whole... Tch, it works.”

“Won’t this work with just a few more small adjustments?”

“If we add the zest to my aspic...”

The members began discussing things on the premise that yuzu would be used. It seemed that using the scent to give the plate a sense of unity was a success. Now I could leave the remaining adjustments to the experts.

“Thanks for preparing what would be most suitable, Ruston.”

“...I didn’t know it had such an all-purpose use, though.”

Now one final problem remained— how would a normal customer assess this, as opposed to specialists in cuisine?

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“Color me surprised, it’s actually looking good. But ya know, it’s not all that simple to sell something people have never seen before, even if it looks nice. The festival only lasts three days.”

“The unfamiliar scent may even work as a detriment, more so if we consider young noble ladies as our target audience. We need to take into consideration that our customers are cowards.”

Dargan moved on to the next problem, and Plura added his own comments while looking at Lilka and Shirley. It was rather reassuring that they had a firm grasp of their target customer base. Just as they said, the outer appearance and portions here were clearly targeted towards women. Lilka and Shirley’s reactions were heartening, but those two were concerned parties by all definitions of the term. They also weren’t nobles who placed far more emphasis on their reputation than commoners did.

“I have left everything regarding the cooking to all of you, so I’ve prepared something myself regarding that matter. I have in fact invited someone over to sample the food.”

I was planning to directly test whether our target audience would accept this dish.

“Well, ain’t that meticulous of you... But *you* invited someone?”

“Considering our target audience, we cannot simply rely on some half-hearted judge. There might be some sense in it from an objective point of view which gives it a different worth from Lilka and Shirley, though...”

My two upperclassmen had misgivings about the connections of a copper company. Ruston remained silent. Lilka seemed to have suddenly realized what was going on, and told Shirley to wait while trying to get the others to consent.

“Mia, could you call them in?”

After Mia looked at the others with slight concern, she rose from her seat.

Everyone here already knows that she's somewhat related to this, so it'll probably be fine. I stood up myself and waited for the door to open. Mia then returned with a chestnut-haired schoolgirl in tow.

"...?"

"I see. Well, I suppose she's very close to the most suitable choice."

"There's a small problem regarding her objectivity, but you could say this is a suitable choice."

Setting me aside as I cocked my head, Dargan and Plura were suddenly convinced. *Hang on, I'm not convinced at all here. Who is this?*

"Maria? Please tell us beforehand if you were planning on coming here..."

"Yeah, geez... That really got me tense..."

Judging from what Lilka and Shirley said, I could tell this upperclassman-looking girl was related to the Kendalls. In all likelihood, she was from the main branch.

"Heehee, should you really be acting all surprised just for little ol' me?"

The remaining three girls, which were the ones I actually expected, followed Mia and Maria into the room. First was Claudia, who, despite her demeanor, was still the daughter of Viscount Adel. Behind her was Louisa, the daughter of Viscount Morland. These two were a perfect fit for our target audience.

Just these two were enough to fill the entire room with tension. And then the last girl entered the room. Of course, the one standing between her two aides, with gleaming platinum hair, was none other than the courtyard's supervisor.

"What... the...?"

"Impossible..."

Both Dargan and Plura, who refused to be shocked by anything until now, rose from their seats and sent their chairs skidding back at the arrival of the noble ladies.

Ruston looked like he knew Maria would be coming, but was completely caught off guard himself. He rose to his feet a beat behind the two

upperclassmen. Everyone was now standing at attention.

“How’s that? If we’re able to satisfy the palates of these fine ladies, I do believe the one-plate lunch can be considered a success.”

They could surely be considered the best candidates for marketing towards high-class noble ladies. Even the one exception who wasn’t a noble could be said to be the highest class among commoners.

“Weinder. That’s not the problem...” Lilka said, holding her hand to her brow.

“Umm...” Shirley muttered as she clung to Lilka’s sleeve and trembled. “We were introduced earlier, right? Princess Alfina is the courtyard’s...”

The supposed neutral party also happened to be responsible for managing the courtyard, but everyone putting up a shop in the courtyard was present. There was no problem regarding her being impartial.

“Having her come to greet us is different from having her come to sample food...” Lilka sounded completely worn out.

“It’s my duty as an official, after all. I actually find this quite enjoyable.” Alfina replied with a smile, but that only racked up the tension in the room even more.

The Food Court Firm members somehow managed to pull themselves together, and began explaining their dishes one by one. As expected of silver companies, they were really level-headed. Plura in particular was rather refined. He was like a *garçon* in a French restaurant.

Each member finished explaining the cuisine, and the four young ladies looked at the collage atop their plates in admiration as they took up their silverware. Even the way they ate gave off the sense of beautiful flowers. It was amazing how metal and porcelain were coming in contact, yet not a single sound could be heard.

“Is this vegetable dish something like a salad? The colorfulness of all these vegetables is beautiful. The discrepancy between the texture and the taste is also magnificent.”

“I-I’m honored th-th-th-that you th-think so, Y-Your H-H-H-Highness.” Shirley

somehow managed to get her trembling lips to move.

“With this, I do believe that no shame will be brought upon the princess.”

“Thank you kindly, Miss Adel.” Dargan bent his sturdy body at the waist.
Why’s his reaction such a 180 from before?

“It goes down so smoothly. You must be using excellent milk.”

“I’m delighted to hear you say so, Miss Louisa.” Lilka managed to keep her respectful expression from crumbling, but you could still hear the happiness in her voice. She seemed to have gotten somewhat used to it by now.

“The way the mousse melts on the tip of your tongue, coupled with the taste of the berries, is splendid.”

“...I’m honored that you’re satisfied with it.”

Even Plura was obediently accepting his praise. The one doing so for an independent company’s goods was none other than Maria Kendall.

The five of them ignored me and began discussing how to improve each of their dishes. Plura brought up the idea of drawing a pattern on the plate using a sauce made from junos. *Now that I think of it, they did similar things in the other world too. I completely overlooked that. I guess that’s a specialist for you.*

“Is this gonna work? It sounds like it’s gonna work.”

“All that’s left is the Food Court’s layout and design.”

“...Her Highness praised me...”

“...”

All the members were now full of motivation. Not that Ruston ever said anything beyond what was necessary. Well, a baguette’s just a baguette, so it helps that there wasn’t any weird emphasis that needed to be placed on it. However, I could tell that his ears pricked up when the aroma from the junos was praised.

Phew, looks like I somehow or other managed to pull off my role as the manager here.

“I’m glad that I came along at Miss Louisa’s request. Now that I think of it, you

were also the one to introduce Lilka to her, weren't you?" Maria came to talk to me as I stood to the side just watching over everyone.

"Please give your thanks to Mia," I replied with a smile to the guest I didn't invite. "More importantly..."

"I know. Miss Louisa did not make a request to the Kendalls themselves. Jean evaluated you quite highly, so I simply thought of taking a look for myself." Maria put her finger to her chin and stared right at me. "Even though the administrative system behind the Food Court Firm is quite surprising, the concept behind this dish is also wonderful. Furthermore..." Maria then looked at the seats our noble guests were occupying. "You have outrageous connections. I'll need to report this not only to Jean, but to my father as well."

"Nothing of the sort. I didn't even contribute a single item to the dish."

"Weren't you the one to give it further revisions? You created a single commodity by gathering five completely different companies. That's not something a copper company is capable of. Your subordinate also seems quite talented. To think she can so easily digest the complicated finances of having all these companies gathered together like this... It's to the point where that girl is all I ever hear about from Lilka. She told me to at least meet her and see it for myself."

Maria directed her gaze at Mia. *Does that mean they're trying to headhunt my secretary? Well, I can understand from the viewpoint that she doesn't look like someone who should be employed by a copper. From Lilka's perspective, she surely thought it was for Mia's own sake. Now that I think of it, I feel like she was far more antagonistic towards me before. But I'm not handing her over; the Weinders would go bankrupt without her.*

"Say, do you have any interest in working for us?" Maria asked as she folded her arms.

Even though push-up brassieres didn't exist here, it put a strong emphasis on her beautiful breasts.

"I have no intention of coming under the Kendall umbrella."

Although, it was worth considering loaning money from them after I managed

to get funds out of Euphylia.

“How regrettable. Truly...” She then looked over to Alfina. “By some chance, wouldn’t it actually be possible for you to do something about Archduchess Berthold too?”

“Princess Alfina is simply cooperating with us out of her personal responsibility as an official. Besides...”

“It won’t work out because of the conflict between the east and west.”

“Exactly. Umm, have you had any luck in approaching the more neutral Duke What’s-His-Name in the central region?”

“...Unfortunately not. Being closest to the capital, it’s all the more difficult to get a grasp of any future prospects he would latch on to.”

Maria looked at me with pleading eyes. *I mean, I don’t even remember his name; how am I supposed to have a plan regarding that? The only thing I can do right now is liven up the courtyard during the Academy Festival. How this girl puts that to use is up to her.*

“Oh well. I suppose we should be thankful for that, at the very least.”

“Please focus on enhancing a unifying force within the guild. You couldn’t even get past this point last time, right? If you can break through the preliminary phase and become a candidate, you should be able to preserve a minimum level of unification. Even after the Carlests become the representative...”

If the Kendalls were to lose the election, it would be troublesome if they didn’t have the minimum amount of power needed to oppose the Carlests.

“...Are you trying to say that’s what our main point of compromise was from the very beginning?”

“I’m sure there’s nothing better than actually winning. But realistically speaking, you’re holding back your expectations, aren’t you?”

“My, your insight knows no end... Our minimum line of compromise is, in fact, to fight for the seat of deputy representative to the death. We are, of course, aiming for victory, though.”

“Could you tell me a little more about how the rankings during the Academy Festival are determined?”

I forcefully changed the topic, and Maria narrowed her gaze. I did this fully intent on telling her that I had enough of that topic, but I was also seriously interested in what I asked about. I’d heard from Fulsig of the coins’ special nature, but I had no information at all as to how they were used.

“You should already have your hands full with the preparations for your shop alone, and here you’re even spreading your vision out towards the structure of the festival as a whole while keeping a keen watch for any problems that may occur.”

That was what planning countermeasures was all about, after all. Just like I told the other members, I had no personal interest in my own rank. It was fine if we were at the very bottom as long as we got the courtyard to be suitably lively and keep the Weinders out of the red. If a copper were to untactfully get a high rank, it’d be dangerous for my self-preservation.

However, the Carlests had already shown how overbearing they were willing to act. Even setting aside the Weinders, I had a responsibility as the manager regarding our other members’ ranks.

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“Hmm, that’s pretty good.”

After our members and the sampling party left, I paid Fulsig his rental fee for the room. But my conversation with the sage wasn’t about his one-plate lunch or the wine he had on the side. We were talking about my proposal for improving the ley line measurement antenna.

“Please focus. I’m keeping you company even though this is one of the brief moments of respite I have in between all my work. Firstly, the particularities... umm, the color of mana, was it? We need to be able to match that, right?”

Our current problem was the mana catalyst painted on the surface of our prototype parabolic antenna. Under normal circumstances, mana interacts with practically no substances. In short, even if the antenna caught mana, it would just slip through.

It's like trying to catch electromagnetic waves with a teacup. If we couldn't accomplish it, then we couldn't make it wireless. If we were to try and use a metal that mana could flow through like brightsilver, not only would we not have enough, but it would just end up absorbing it all and we would lose information such as directionality.

To increase the precision, we needed the technology to increase both the efficiency of reflection, and the uniformity with which the dish was coated with the mana catalyst. I could tell this much even though I was blind to mana.

"How about matching it to that coin's mana? We can focus our resources on theoretical verification without wasting any precious magicite," I suggested.

"You sure do like to emphasize verification. Well, you have a point. We can't make something perfect off the bat."

"It'll be a good form of insurance for me too, so if possible, it'll be a big help."

"The Academy Festival, huh? It's just a big old pain in the butt for me, though... But if we were to use it as an experiment..."

After putting some thought into it, Fulsig was requested by the student council to give a lecture during the opening ceremonies. I could sympathize with that. Both with the unmotivated professor, and with the students made to listen to him.

What's left now...? Oh yeah, gathering intelligence on the Empire. Let's use our new employee of the year recipient. Jacob happens to be a former soldier, after all. He didn't actually serve during the war with the Empire, but records of that time must have remained within the organization itself.

Interlude 2: Official and Secret

The back door opened with a creak. A man's thick arm, covered in a thin and expensive flax shirt, supported the door. His garments, including a sleeveless bearskin coat, were those of a wealthy merchant.

"Please give my regards to His Grace."

The merchant reverently bowed to the ashen man on the other side of the door. The man, wearing a hooded robe which covered his entire head and body, said nothing in return and parted down the back street. His soundless footsteps vanished into the twilight.

After the merchant quickly shut the door, he walked towards his backyard without giving a single glance back. His strides were so vigorous as he trampled over the weeds that one would not expect him to be a merchant who usually traveled by carriage.

"Even though I finally suppressed Adcock, now it's Billingham... There's just too much. It's not even all that profitable for me..."

Dandolph Carlest unintentionally muttered his discontent towards his noble lord's command. For someone with his base in the eastern Kingdom, suppressing a company in the northwestern region only made managing things all the more complex. The goods of the companies under his umbrella were already overlapping as it was.

This was likely a means of keeping the Archduchess of the West in check, but Dandolph didn't believe that a mere silver company would be of any interest to his lord.

"Come to think of it, that man had a northwestern accent, didn't he?"

Meaning it was perhaps a suggestion made by that messenger. His lord was one who didn't see commoners as anything more than dogs or horses. When did that man manage to curry so much favor with him? Even his exaggerated knowledge of the Empire seemed like it would be insufficient for that.

"No, taking into account the companies we've captured so far, there's

another possibility...”

The image of the main road which stretched across the Kingdom from east to west along with all the business regions of the companies scattered about it came to mind.

“It has to do with the transportation routes from east to west. Meaning the Caravan Guild’s Giverny Company may be involved with the prime minister’s expectations...”

Carlest crushed the weeds at his feet with his boarskin shoes. If both an archduke and duke were involved, though there was still some margin for error, he couldn’t handle things carelessly.

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After going through the back door to his house and heading to the main hall, Dandolph found his son and daughter waiting for him.

“Pops, those guests of yours are waiting. Both official and secret,” his son, with a rugged-looking build similar to his father, said to him.

“Though it pains me to criticize those you associate with, father... The guild representative shall become an honorary noble. Would it not be fine to leave dealing with such characters to one of our child companies? Especially that one...” his daughter, wearing luxurious clothing for what was supposed to be house wear, said while shivering.

“Zeldia. Those two are an asset precisely when they are put together. There is both an official and secret side to everything. Being able to manipulate that from the dead center is the most powerful choice. It’s not something we can leave to strangers.”

Dandolph rubbed his stomach. He had a scar tearing across his abdomen under his clothes. It was a wound he received twenty years ago when he was made to transport goods by his negligent father to the army suppressing the rebellion at the time. His two visitors were acquaintances he made back then.

“I understand that we require more strength, but aren’t you going too far lately? Didn’t we make sure not to lay our hands on silvers before?” His son also voiced his anxieties as he shrunk back ever so slightly.

“You’re right, they’re not opponents we really need to go so far to capture. We’ve already hardened the ballots we need for the guild too.”

“So why?”

“It’s an order from above. We can’t refuse. Hmmm, think of it this way: we need to be completely thorough so that the Kendalls are removed from their seat as deputy representative after the election. Setting that aside, how are things at the Academy? There’s a need for us to display our strength there so that there isn’t even the smallest chance those neutral parties go over to the Kendalls.”

“We’re working on it. Fundamentally, there aren’t any problems, but...” his son Theodore commented.

“Lady Hilda is set on making that princess her enemy, so things have gotten somewhat complicated...” Zeldia added.

“Even if it’s because he finally managed to get a daughter at his age, the archduke dotes on her way too much. Both father and daughter really don’t spare any expense...”

“Their next request is some stupidly expensive distilled liquor, and ice for a cold room. Just how much do they think ice costs at this time of the year...?” Theodore grumbled.

“I’ve told you many times now, haven’t I? We merchants cannot win against the armed might of the nobles. Take a good look at the sword closing in on you. The gold in your purse serves no use before the fear of death.”

Dandolph struck the old wound on his stomach. It was an experience he went through twenty years ago already.

“I shall use what little violence I can on my own battlefield. Unlike a military battleground, even a small knife is capable of causing one to tremble in the middle of town. That also means it has to be used that much more cleverly, though.” Dandolph stroked his own sturdy-looking arms. “In any case, report to me at once if things seem to be going bad.”

With that, he headed towards the room used for his secret meetings.

Chapter 12: Raising the Curtain

Eight large shadows stretched out along the courtyard as the sun poured down from above. They were a monument to the great victory of the mushroom faction, the parasols of the Food Court. Back in the other world, I was part of the bamboo shoot faction, though.

“Looks like we made it in time, somehow.”

The sky-blue parasols stood over tables covered with white tablecloths, and grey fabric covered the ground. All of these were brand new. It was an extravagance that we could afford precisely because six different companies provided the capital. At our last meeting, we ended up deciding that each company would increase their investment by 30 percent.

From my personal perspective, this looked closer to a restaurant terrace than a food court. Not that I ever had anything to do with such restaurants in that world.

Standing in the center of the circle of eight tables, I could see the crests of each company by the first story windows of the school building. It seems they desperately tried to hide the fact that these were all storerooms.

Apparently, all the construction and such was done with the assistance of each member's households. I guess that was to be expected of silver companies; they really did have significant skill in making such preparations. To us, this was our grand stage, but the rumors being spread by the students watching us get everything prepared in a frenzy were just the best. From a self-preservation perspective, of course.

That said, Dargan, who took charge of the construction, was left with a bitter smile after it all finished, though.

I looked up at the clear skies. We were blessed with great weather. So we were now fully prepared to make use of our locational advantage. All that was left...

“Sir? They've begun preparations for the food.” Mia called out to me.

Yup, all that was left was the essential merchandise.

I went with Mia towards the gathering place of all the cooking assistants. Just to the side of our eight tables, we set up a place where the one-plate lunch could be arranged using the food prepared by each company.

“This is the model. Do use it as reference material as best you can,” Plura said as he drew a thin line using a pale-yellow sauce and traced a pattern around the food placed on the plate.

The one-plate lunch that I originally proposed had changed completely. The colors and traits of each individual dish were made to stand out more, and the tastes harmonized even better. For example, Plura’s mousse used to be donut-shaped, but now it was split in two pieces and lined up next to each other in alternate arrangements. This was apparently done so that it didn’t overlap with the shape of a container. The vegetable aspic had zested junos skin in it, and they even mixed in some junos juice with the cheese kneaded into the pudding.

This was all completely out of my hands. When it came to practical work experience, they were far more talented than I was. And though it was somewhat shameful, as the manager of the Food Court Firm, I was quite thankful that I could concentrate entirely on guaranteeing our security and the general trend of the Food Court as a whole.

“Jacob and Remy will come in the afternoon it seems,” Mia reported.

“I see. Well, their main job only starts tomorrow.”

I looked at the two buildings and the gazebos surrounding the Food Court on three sides. The Carlest umbrella companies used the school building to create luxurious wide-open spaces to use as their shops.

Apparently, the gazebos were being used to host tea parties for the nobles where they would be waited on by merchants marketing their own goods. This wasn’t any sort of direct competition for us.

Looking at this magnificent box which surrounded us on all sides, it practically looked like a military encampment that we went through the trouble of making in the middle of a castle.

Just moments ago, I saw two siblings pointing at us and laughing from the

second story windows. *Keep it up, that's what we need. It's out of the question if you're not acting careless.*

"Morning, Weinder. Here you go, Mia. It's what you asked for," Lilka said as she came up to us.

"Thanks."

"So, why exactly do you need to know the trends on popular accessories?"

"Trade secret."

"I wasn't asking you, Weinder."

"I'll tell you later."

"Et tu, Mia?"

"Despite putting on the airs of a schemer, Ricardo is rather bad at keeping secrets, so I have to be the one to keep such things under wraps."

"Huh... I kinda get it, I guess? Umm, I'll go into the details now. Also, Shirley had some questions about the finances..."

Lilka, Mia, and Shirley began discussing the finances as well as our marketing drive. On this note, Lilka was settled on as the chief of reception while Shirley ended up as Mia's assistant.

I then headed towards the elegant white tent set to the side of the Food Court.

"It looks a lot better than I thought it would."

Claudia greeted me at the entrance of the tent. With this sword wielding knight standing in front of the tent, it really did give off the feeling of a military encampment. Now, as for our commander...

"Good morning, Princess Alfina."

"Good morning. How are the preparations coming along?"

"Everything is progressing smoothly so far."

Alfina half stood to her feet as Louisa held her back. Just earlier, she made her rounds to each shop as the supervisor of the courtyard to give them her

greetings, leaving everyone in a rush to do more. It did help move things along since we were already in a rush, and it did also seem to raise morale.

“Is it really alright for me not to do anything?”

“Just being here is the greatest form of support you can provide,” I replied to the princess as she elegantly seated herself back in her chair.

In a sense, this here was the poster girl for our Food Court.

*

“And here they come.”

After I came out of the tent, Dargan walked up to me. The school gates had just opened, and we could see luxurious carriages coming in one after the other. The curtain was finally raised— or perhaps it was more appropriate to say the battle had begun.

“Put in some spirit. We’re gonna scare the hell outta the Carlests.”

Dargan smacked my back. It was good to see him so motivated.

“Frankly speaking, the first day will be pretty tight. Please don’t lose heart over it.”

“Like hell I’m gonna.”

He slapped my back once more. *A critical hit. Well, I guess it’s a good thing that we’re able to have this sort of exchange now.*

The extravagantly dressed guests descended from their carriages and filed into the white school building. A few exceptions headed straight towards the gazebos, and not a single guest came by the Food Court. It was entirely possible that the group of parasols appeared to be nothing more than a luggage area to them.

Nobody dropped by because they had no idea what would happen here, and since nobody dropped by, it looked even less attractive as a shop.

*

After a while, visitors began showing up in the courtyard. They weren’t here for the Food Court, but were waiting in line in front of Alfina’s tent.

“We’re doing things just as planned, but still no one, huh?”

“There’s still just ten of them. That’s the way things go.”

I forced a relaxed expression to hide my concern as I replied to Lilka. Our members were casually walking up to Alfina’s visitors with the one-plate lunch. From what I could see, they were drawing some interest, but we still hadn’t gotten any orders.

I had asked Alfina to make sure that she absolutely did not make recommendations for the Food Court. One reason was in fact because her nature wasn’t capable of such force of personality, but the more important reason was that it would have the opposite effect on our expected patrons for the day. In any case, all she had to do was gather people in the area.

The omens so far weren’t bad. Visitors who came to greet the princess showed up earlier than I thought they would, and there were more of them than expected. They were mostly nobles from the west connected to Archduchess Berthold, as well as nobles from the central Kingdom attracted by her newfound fame from the prophecy.

According to Alfina’s manager of public relations, Louisa, even a few nobles from the east had come. This was likely Hilda’s plan at work to make a show of the princess’s pitiful state here in the courtyard. In which case, they wouldn’t serve as potential patrons. Normally, that is.

However, the customers we were hoping for on the opening day of the Food Court weren’t bound by that manner of geographical or political standard. It was more a question of their personality, or perhaps their nature.

It was said in marketing that 2.5 percent of potential customers were innovators, the type who were extremely fond of curiosities. That was only one in 40 people. Taking into account that this was a festival, the chance of such an early adopter being in the pack could be increased to 5 percent at most.

Putting it another way, as long as we attracted the attention of as many people as we could, we would be able to entice someone who would be up for the challenge of trying something new. The data I had on this wasn’t from this world, but human nature didn’t change all that much no matter where you went. If it was different on such a level, my social senses would be even more

off track than they already were. I did of course plan on taking data here too.

“In any case, I’m leaving it to you and Mia to get a grasp of customer trends here.”

“Got it. That said, though, no one has even... Oh!”

A middle-aged man with a short mustache came out of Alfina’s tent accompanied by a girl who looked about the age of a middle-schooler. It was likely the father and little sister of one of the noble students. Lilka’s gaze was aimed at the girl’s necklace. The mainstream decoration for high society used flowers for the design, but hers used a bird.

Just as before, one of our one-plate lunches was carried over to give them a look. The girl came to a stop. Plura, who was in charge of explaining the dish, was called over, and she asked him something or other.

And then...

“Looks like our commemorative first customer.”

The hesitant father was urged on by his daughter towards a seat.

“I just recalled something I was told, Father. Is a dish not as delicious as how beautifully it sits atop a plate?”

“You’re right... Mm, the sauce patterned around the edges has a splendid design.”

The girl’s eyes were sparkling as she looked at the plate. Her father shrugged his shoulders with a “good grief”-looking expression, then began to take interest, being led along by his daughter. This had Plura grinning.

“Furthermore, the aroma of the sauce is quite curious.”

“Indeed, I was somewhat opposed to it at first, but it’s quite interesting once you’re used to it. Mhm, it isn’t bad.”

Ruston remained silent, but his fist was tightly clenched, whereas Lilka and Shirley joined their hands in joy.

*

The sun was approaching its zenith. The shadows cast by the parasols were

close to perfect circles. And now, the Food Court was in a slightly better state.

Even our members looked somewhat more cheerful compared to this morning when the cuckoos were singing. Our chief of reception Lilka was going around the tables with energetic steps. All of our customers were basically nobles who came to greet Alfina. However, we also had visitors who were just passing between the school building and the gazebos come by every now and then.

Just as we planned, most of our customers were women, and the men felt like they were just brought along. After they took their seats though, everyone left satisfied.

“Mhm. Isn’t this better than what I had last time?”

On a completely unrelated note, Fulsig was smacking his lips behind me with his mock-up parabolic antenna in hand. The numerology professor who came with him also nodded with a serious expression. I guess he was somewhat related. Ignoring any distinction by gender, this geezer fell dead center in our anticipated customer base. Oh, Alfina did too, I suppose.

“How’s it going, Mia...?”

“Everything is going as you hypothesized so far, sir.” Mia replied as she looked at the numbers in her hand.

The characteristics of all our customers was that they all loved new things regardless of age or gender. Nobles certainly did have a tendency to respect tradition, and they couldn’t make unwise decisions out of risk of ruining the reputation of their house. But that’s also exactly why they had a hunger for new things. And to them, this was just a festival. Even if they made some sort of blunder here, they could just laugh it off and be done with it.

*

“I doubted your sanity, seeing that you were trying to do business out of a courtyard and some storerooms, but you are most certainly hanging in there.”

“Teehee, oh my, you’re unexpectedly putting up quite a brave fight, aren’t you?”

“Well, if it isn’t the Carlests... Haha, it’s been quite educational.”

The Carlest siblings were in a great mood seeing only one group under the parasols. There was more than one just earlier, but they really did come to take a look with the best timing, so I was in a great mood myself.

“So, how about it? Would you like to try one?”

I stood in front of them to block them from seeing the food being carried to the table, praying silently that they would refuse, of course.

“Regrettably, we’ll have to refrain. We are terribly busy, you see.”

“Haha, the Kendalls will have to put in just a little more effort. It must be terrible to have the customers of our child companies judge them so.”

And unusually enough, my prayers were answered. With this, it would be too late for them to try and start anything with us. It would be fine for them to begin getting wary on the third day. However, the way the older brother had his eyes on the crest of Dargan’s shop and the little sister looked at Plura’s shop had me somewhat troubled. Those were our two independent companies.

It’s fine if your parents think they may be going to the Kendalls and asked you to prod. That sort of intelligence gathering is normal. However, this is the Academy, a place of education. At least try to keep up your official stance. I’d prefer if you didn’t get in the way of my work as the manager of this Food Court. At any rate...

“I see things are starting to get going, Mia.”

“Yes.”

I looked at the numbers on the memo Mia held out to me. We were expecting things to start getting very busy.

*

“Huh?”

As I headed towards the tent, I saw an upperclassman in glasses coming out and cocked my head to the side. It was the prime minister’s grandson, Vice President Leonardo. He was on his own with what looked like a stack of documents in hand. He went back to the school building, going out of his way to

use the path towards the library as if trying to avoid being spotted by any guests at the Food Court.

It wasn't all that strange thinking of it from the perspective of a student council member contacting the supervisor of the courtyard. However, I felt like the president of said student council, Hilda, had been quite fussy about making sure Alfina was the one summoned over there up until now.

Louisa and Claudia were inside the tent just as they were in the morning. Apparently, they had a rotation including Alicia as well. It was something about needing someone to stay at the cathedral as well.

"What did the vice president need?" I asked Louisa.

It was, as expected, just a relay of information from the student council. Everything about it was normal too. It seemed Hilda was away from the Academy in the afternoon to get ready to receive the envoys from the Empire.

"Umm, nobles from the east have been dropping by too, right? Were there some who were close to either the Archduke of the East or the duke serving a prime minister?"

"Of course, we're being mindful of that. But we can't say anything yet. Incidentally, why are you so interested in this?"

"...I'll focus on the Food Court. Are you not bored being in here all this time, Princess Alfina?"

"Not at all. You even drop by as you are now, Ricardo. Now that I think of it, you aren't selling anything yourself, are you? I thought you would be selling that treat you made."

"The Weinders are, at most, working behind the scenes this time around."

I didn't really want to be intrusive, but that was one of the valuable pieces of modern world knowledge that could easily be reproduced here. I had already used one of my aces up my sleeves here with the junos fruit, small as it was. I needed to keep a careful watch over my inventory of information.

"What's this about a treat...? No, never mind."

"Shall I make some for you next time, Clau? It's very delicious."

“Wha—? Cooking, Your Highness? What if you burn yourself?” Claudia glared at me.

Alfina did drop by for her part-time job once more after that, and I taught her how to make it then. It was at most a part of her lessons. I couldn’t possibly allow Claudia to know that she had tried to grasp the frying pan’s metal handle bare-handed, and that I had panicked and grabbed her hand.

“In any case, please be careful. There’s also the matter with the Empire, we must be cautious,” Louisa said.

“You’re right. There was also that matter last night,” Claudia added with a nod.

So something really did happen with the Empire. It was abnormal for Claudia to be warier of something than she was of me.

The bell marking the end of business hours rang out.

Now then, shall we go take a look at the results of our opening day?

Chapter 13: The Plan for the Second Half

The commoner students were all gathered in front of the student council room on the top floor of the school building. Their bloodshot eyes were focused on the tentative rankings currently affixed outside the room.

It was a simple sales ranking using the specially allotted coins. There were what looked like strongboxes with numbers on them for each company on the other side of the rankings, which was where companies deposited their special coins made from sales every day.

Incidentally, this was converted into an operating expense and repaid to the companies after the festival. It was something along the lines of 70 percent being paid back, and the remaining 30 percent was considered a donation to the Academy.

Considering only the shops that were just dealing in food and drinks, there were 24 companies in all.

“Even if it’s just as you expected, it still ain’t looking good, huh?” Dargan muttered as he looked at the very bottom of the list.

All of the members of our holdings were grouped together at the bottom of the rankings. Even if the number of coins didn’t match our actual revenue, this only stood to reason, since all five companies here were in the red after the opening day. The Weinders were dead last by a large margin as well. The only proceeds coming in or out of this for us so far was one-sixth of the rental fee for the Food Court.

Just a little above us was an influential company formerly under the Dreyfan umbrella. Being practically forced to take a certain space, they ended up getting sandwiched between companies under the Carlest umbrella, and were apparently quite hard-pressed to do business.

“I see. That’s quite the plain split, isn’t it, Jean?”

Taking a closer look, the students running shops focused on food and drink were split into three clear groups. The first group was surrounding the Carlest siblings. These were those under the Carlest umbrella, the independent companies close to them, and the companies formerly under the Dreyfan umbrella who were absorbed by them. It looked like somewhere around 12 companies total.

The other group was us. We were standing next to Jean and Maria, so it looked like we were the Kendall faction. Three of us actually were, so that wasn’t entirely wrong. If you didn’t count the Weinders, seeing as we had no voting rights, that was a total of five companies. That made a difference of seven companies between them. *Can I just stay neutral?*

This here was a perfect influence diagram of the coming elections for the next representative of the Culinary Guild.

There were, of course, companies who were excluded due to the collusion between the Carlests and the student council, as well as companies who didn’t have children attending the Academy, so it wasn’t a complete picture, but still...

“Never mind the third you need, it looks like you’re below a quarter of the votes, huh?”

“There are those who are neutral and bear clear animosity towards the way the Carlests do things. Especially among the independent companies...”

I see, there are students looking at Dargan and Plura too. However, at only that level of interest, humans will ultimately try to stick to the strong. That’s because the continued existence of one’s shop is more important than mere animosity. Dargan and Plura aren’t really supporting the Kendalls, anyway.

Just then, the door to the student council room opened, and a schoolgirl with curly blonde hair came out alongside a schoolgirl with lustrous platinum hair. Behind them were Leonardo and Louisa.

“I’ve been quite busy with the preparations for receiving tomorrow’s envoys, as well as managing the school building, so I haven’t been able to come and see you. Nevertheless, it seems you’ve been doing your best, Alfina.”

Hilda lorded over the commoner students, but spoke to Alfina with a smile. She then looked at the ranking list with a meaningful gaze. It seemed she was confirming for herself that I was at the very bottom.

The location for each shop was quite thoroughly color-coded as well. Shops written in red were those located in the school building, placed neatly at the top of the rankings, as if they were crushing the blue names of those in the courtyard. Those in the gazebos were written in green and dispersed here and there above us as well.

“It looks like everyone from the Food Court is hanging in there too,” she said cynically, yet Alfina nodded back to her gently.

“It’s quite the considerable job managing such a large shop in the courtyard. Umm, Weinder, right?” Leonardo called out to me. He was the one responsible for putting together the rankings.

“We somehow managed to get things together. We must try harder so that we do not squander the kindness the student council has shown us,” I innocuously replied.

Leonardo had nothing more to say.

“Allow me to give you a warning, as your senior. A single curiosity will only attract attention in the beginning.”

“It seems that all the Carlest affiliates have placed in the upper rankings across the board. Congratulations.”

The Carlest siblings came over to give their greetings, completely ignoring all the bloodthirsty gazes the Food Court members were pointing at them.

“Of course. We *are* the group who will serve as the next guild representative. We cannot possibly afford to embarrass ourselves in the rankings.”

Theodore looked at the Kendall siblings. The actual decision on who the next representative would be hadn’t been made yet. He was acting somewhat hasty.

“Tomorrow, His Highness the Imperial Prince Dagobahd will be visiting as well.”

Hilda brought things to an end and left, as all the commoner students bowed

to her. I was a little uneasy about the Empire too, but my priority right now was the management of the Food Court and dealing with our enemies within the Academy.

At any rate, I needed to change my plans for tomorrow starting now. I called out the Food Court members saying, "It'll be bad at this rate, so I'd like to discuss things for tomorrow."

We left the room and headed towards the courtyard. The gazes following us were clearly telling us, "Such futile resistance, and all just to try and diminish your losses."

*

"Hang on a sec, we need to prepare double what we had today?!" Lilka yelled.

"We did in fact have more customers in the afternoon, but we still haven't passed the line for making a profit yet," Plura added.

"The shriveled vegetables we aren't selling are used for soup at dinner... I'm not gonna be able to eat it all..." Shirley mumbled.

After arriving at the courtyard, I proposed our plans for preparing for the next day. And of course, they all looked at me in bewilderment. That was only a matter of course, considering I just told them to increase our stockpiles despite already being in the red.

"Let's at least hear him out here. Come on, Weinder's the manager and all," Dargan said.

"...Just allow me to confirm. You want to double the stocks used only for the one-plate lunch?" Ruston asked me.

"That's right."

"I mean, I guess our customers thought it was pretty good, but you know..." Lilka mumbled.

"There's not all that much going into each plate, so doubling it is at least manageable," Plura commented.

"Well, whatever. It's pretty simple, 'cause we're just making our stuff all at once anyway," Dargan added.

“...B-But can you at least tell us why?” Shirley asked hesitantly.

“Judging by the trends among the type of customers we got, we hypothesize that the reputation of the Food Court will snowball in growth.”

I pulled out the aggregate results of which categories our customers fell under today, courtesy of Mia.

“From only that many customers? Actually, how can you even tell the types of customers apart?” Dargan asked.

“Mia and Lilka had a look at the accessories they wore.”

We recorded our customers who were wearing designs and colors which were currently popular, those that used to be popular, and the strange ones that had yet to show any signs of being popular.

“Please look at the trends throughout the day of these three categories. The first two-thirds of the day were largely guests wearing the stranger accessories which are not yet popular. However, for the remaining third of the day, we saw a gradual increase in customers wearing what’s currently popular.”

“Splitting it up by the hour? You’ve been thinking of such minor details all this time, Weinder?” Dargan raised an astonished voice, even as he stared at Mia’s graph.

This was the so-called diffusion of innovations theory. However, unlike the modern world linked together by the internet, the circulation speed of information here was fairly slow, and there was no form of mass media.

But Everett Rogers had published this theory in 1962. The internet, and even cellular phones, had yet to spread at that point. Moreover, the market this time around was extremely narrow. Noble society could even be said to be like a tiny village that loved rumors.

In truth, the calculations Mia made regarding our types of customers — in other words, the distribution of human curiosity — had already begun showing hints of fundamentally adhering to the same trend.

“The trend of customers shows a clear change in the second half of the day, specifically in the last third. The reputation of the Food Court has begun

spreading to an even wider customer base. And the speed at which it's doing so is faster than anticipated."

The small spark that Alfina ignited was now making its way to the powder keg.

"Determining the amount of merchandise that we should be supplying tomorrow and the volume of sales during the second half of the festival — *that's* the meaning behind Mia and Lilka's investigation."

The other members of the Food Court looked at myself, Mia, and the graph in turn.

"A division of customers based on their personalities... I've never heard of this approach... I do kinda get the logic behind it, though. There's a fixed number of customers who love curiosities among a group. This isn't all that different, even for the nobles who like to put on airs. But will it really go as you planned here?" Lilka asked.

"I'll acknowledge that your theory stands to reason. I see... So the customers who love curiosities will inform those who don't of how wonderful a brand-new commodity is. We've experienced this before at Plura's main store. But doubling the sales this suddenly...?"

Their doubts were well-founded. But this contest only lasted for three days. The risk of the fire dying out was far greater than the risk of having leftover goods that couldn't be sold.

Just the fact that people were gathering served as advertising. Taking into account the visual appeal of the one-plate lunch, there was an effect just from our guests seeing it as they passed by between the school building and the gazebos. This applied even more so if we were able to maintain the number of customers we had at the end of the day, lowering the hurdle for entry.

"We may be able to slip by and get out of the red if we proceed while keeping things completely safe. We may even manage to balance the books the day after tomorrow. So I'll leave the decision up to all of you, since you have been in direct contact with our customers."

Even without looking at Mia's graph, they could directly feel the passion of the customers who ate the one-plate lunch. Even if my hypothesis was backed

by Mia's numbers, it would be dangerous if it didn't coincide with their raw intuition. This was another form of first-hand information.

And if their raw intuition from working the floor happened to coincide with our analysis, then they would surely be willing to take on this risk. That was what I believed.

"...The one-plate lunch is the Food Court's menu. In other words, it's under your jurisdiction. I approve of this plan." Unexpectedly, the one to get things rolling was Ruston.

"Now that we're participating, we just gotta go for broke, right?" Dargan said, pumping himself up.

"You're right. It would be strange if Plura's confections didn't sell more to begin with."

"I guess in the worst case, we can just consider it an advertising fee, huh? And advertising is better off when it's grandiose."

"Y-You're right... Mm, I'll do my best."

With all five members in agreement, they nodded in concert.

The risk of increasing the production of such a complicated commodity as the one-plate lunch was divided into six. Stocks weren't the only advantage of the subdivision of capital.

Chapter 14: The Second Day of Business “It’s not quite up to your prediction, Weinder, but it’s a lot better than yesterday, huh?”

Lilka looked over the seats, of which about a third were occupied. Her cynical tone contrasted with her rather relieved expression.

“Sorry for making you worry.”

“I-It’s not like I was really thinking that it’d be super embarrassing if your predictions were way off the mark or anything.”

That wasn’t my intention, though.

“It looks like we’re starting to sell other things too. Even if everyone’s got something or another to say, nobody’s complaining,” Lilka said, waving her hands about in a panic for some reason, as she went back to her job of supervising the waiters.

“Sir. Please take a look at the results so far.”

“Geez, you scared me there. Don’t just sneak up on me like... Oh, hey, Mia. How’s the analysis going?”

I turned around in a fluster to the voice behind me, and Mia handed me a paper.

“If any problems do come up, then it’d be better if Lilka were... Right, fine, I just have to look, right? Hmm, yup. The trends don’t seem to be showing any problems... That’s not what this is about, is it?”

“Yes. Things are continuing to develop as hypothesized. However, they’re moving faster than anticipated. The numbers show that the early adopters have been completely captured.”

“It’s still the morning of the second day, isn’t it? If we already ate up the premium market for the day...”

“It seems the quality of the one-plate lunch is too high. Its beauty can be seen at a glance, after all.”

The number of customers would jump up all at once. We'd never thought of the possibility that double wouldn't be enough.

"Let's consult with Dargan and Plura. Get in touch with Lilka as well. At the very least, we need to guide the customers from yesterday over to the food served by each company individually. That's what the menu was for in the first place."

And so, I headed over towards my two upperclassmen.

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By the afternoon, the customers had multiplied even further. We were now filling over half our seats. Looking at it from the outside, it probably looked like we had finally gotten things in order. However, thinking about this rate of multiplication, it was a threat. According to Mia's analysis, there was a possibility that the largest category of customers, the early majority, would be settling in imminently.

"Will the one-plate lunch be able to keep up?" I asked, taking a drink of water from the well.

"We've succeeded in guiding customers over to the main dishes served by each company, but..." Lilka said with an exhausted expression.

"...We're running out of plates," Shirley said, as she earnestly washed the dishes.

Originally, she was supposed to serve as Mia's support, but now, we left all calculations to Mia, and had Shirley going around wherever we were short on hands.

"How do I put it...? I kind of feel bad for making the daughter of a silver do this..."

"...What else can we do? That girl doesn't even really need my help."

There are problems in leaving Mia on her own in terms of compliance, but I'll just be thankful for their trust in her right now.

"...In any case, if everything goes as you anticipate, we'll definitely run out tomorrow. Not out of food, but out of seats," Ruston said.

Taking a look over at the seats, they were now 60 percent filled. By all rights, resolving physical limitations should have been difficult. However, that was the advantage of the courtyard: we had all the space we wanted. And no matter how much we used, the venue fee was free.

“We can’t do anything about getting more parasols, but let’s increase the amount of seats. Can you ask your boss about it, Lilka?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks. Oh, Dargan, good timing. When business hours are over, we’re going to need some chairs and such carried over as far as the hallway. Can you help out?”

“Damn straight I can. I’ll tell the other buff guys in the shops to stick behind too.”

I guess all that’s left is to be careful of any interference from the Carlests. When Zeldia coincidentally passed by earlier, she simply said, “Well, good for you, it looks like you’ll be able to make a profit,” with a cramp in her smile. I suppose you could say she was surprised that we could conduct business normally here in the courtyard. If that’s all it was, then we still had some leisure time before they did anything.

However, will they remain equally careless by the end of the day? I’ll have to start preparing something for that now. Their choices for action should be limited, but...

“They could use hired goons to monopolize our seats... But it doesn’t seem like they have enough of a surplus in personnel to pull that off. Most of them are commoner students anyway. They surely don’t have the courage to remain seated while making noble guests wait. If they were to directly interfere, it would likely be difficult if they tried anything during the opening hours as well...”

I watched the guards patrolling the premise as I went over all possible forms of sabotage that could occur. Would their target be the manager, meaning me? In that case, I would have a fair bit of flexibility, seeing that the Weinders weren’t selling anything.

“Should we return the parasols to the lab after business hours are over? We’ve got decoys in our tent prepared already. What else...”

Maybe I’ll also have Louisa and Claudia increase the frequency of patrols in the area. And just as that thought passed my mind...

“Wh-Who are those guys?!”

I spotted an imposing group headed towards Alfina’s tent. They were a little older than the students here, all men around their early twenties. Wait, one of them was a woman. They were all wearing something that looked like a Catholic school uniform with a long coat atop it.

Claudia and Louisa came out of the tent, and they got into a heated dispute with the group in black.

“Sir.”

“Yeah, I’m going to take a look.”

Honestly, I didn’t really want to get involved. But this also fell under the responsibility of the manager of the Food Court.

As I got closer, it appeared that those black uniforms were military attire. They weren’t covered in medals or anything, but there was a crest on their chests. The clothing also appeared to be quite luxurious and had a velvet-like luster to it.

The crest was composed of three intersecting swords and was rather imposing. And that reminded me, this is what the imperial flag looked like — meaning these were our guests of honor from the Empire that Hilda was talking about.

Thinking about it normally, this would be something like a courtesy call to Alfina. But the atmosphere was far too strange for that. Louisa and Claudia were both showing clear determination in not budging an inch before these five visitors.

“To not even allow us to give our greetings... Are you not being rude to Prince Dagobahd?” The woman standing to the side of the one man who had a conspicuously large sword on his crest said.

She had black hair, blue eyes, and seemed to be strong-willed. Standing there in contrast with Claudia's whitish school uniform, she somewhat gave off the feeling of a black knight.

Dagobahd is the name of the imperial prince, right? So that's who the tall man in the middle of the group would be. It was clear that he had a well-balanced and tempered body, even to the untrained eye.

"I do believe her greetings to His Highness were completed during the welcoming party yesterday."

"Though it's a disappointment that she ran away, even though I invited her to a dance." The prince replied to Louisa in an arrogant tone.

"Princess Alfina is a member of the clergy. It is the law that she must not become directly involved with political matters. Especially considering previous events..." Louisa stood her ground while maintaining decorum.

"Clau. Louisa." Alfina came out of her tent, with Alicia standing in front of her with both arms held out and trembling.

"Princess Alfina, I've longed to see you."

The prince's gaze went straight through Alicia as if she didn't exist. The glint in his eyes was that of a predator spotting its prey. It definitely wasn't a proper way for a visiting dignitary to look at a princess. Even as Alfina's body stiffened up, she endured his gaze.

"The Empire has long been troubled by the harm inflicted by monsters. From what I've heard, you have shown the ability to foresee a pack of monsters rampaging before it even occurred, yes? I've also heard of a wizard named Fulsig, but that matters not to me. I wish to hear more about this directly."

"The prophecies of the Oracle Princess are a serious matter to the Kingdom. They are not something to be discussed in such a place as this. Should you not be exercising restraint precisely because of your position as a state guest?"

Alfina's expression faltered upon hearing about harm inflicted by monsters, but Claudia still denied him.

"Furthermore, the princess has a full schedule with her work as an official of

the Academy Festival,” Lousia said, stepping forth and following up after Claudia.

“How strange. According to the organizer Lady Hilda, we’ve been told that she was assigned a role with plenty of free time,” the black-haired girl said.

However, Louisa ostentatiously held her palm out towards the courtyard.

“And just as you can see, the courtyard is bustling with activity. This is, in fact, the first time that a shop has been put up in the courtyard. There is a mountain of cases which must be approved by the princess directly. Please do understand that this is necessary for everyone here to enjoy the festival. Including yourself, Your Highness.”

The black-haired girl faltered slightly at Louisa’s comment. I didn’t really want to step up, but now was the right chance to do so.

“P-P-P-Pardon me.”

Thus, I stepped forth as an overawed commoner. This was the “How did I end up here? I really drew the short straw. What should I do?” act that I’d developed over the last half-year.

But I guess there might not be much of a need for acting here. The imperial prince’s presence packs a punch all on its own. He was a full head taller than me, and looked like a gladiator right out of a movie. He really gave off the feeling that he would fight humans and beasts alike in the Coliseum.

I kept mentally reassuring myself, “This is just a festival,” and managed to squeeze the phrase I had prepared beforehand out through my throat.

“U-Um... Uhh, a quarrel has broken out between several of the students running the shops. I-I am quite terribly sorry to ask, but could you perhaps come along to be a mediator between them...?”

I looked at both the black prince and Claudia with fearful eyes, and the prince looked down at me as if looking at a rat.

“A dispute between mere commoners incapable of even using mana is nothing compared to the threat of monsters. It is not something for a silverblood gifted with the use of an ancient magitech tool to bother with...”

The prince stepped forth while spouting incomprehensible words. *What's an ancient magitech tool? And silverblood...?*

And just then, a loud noise broke out from the Food Court's tables. We then heard two men shouting at each other. It was Dargan and Plura. The surrounding crowd started to get noisy. However, the prince's sharp gaze remained on Alfina, and he took one more step towards her.

"This cannot be ignored. Weinder, take Her Highness with you."

Claudia stepped forth and stood in the prince's way while saying something that made me doubt my ears. I could feel the seething anger of the black group as Louisa urged Alfina towards me, and I somewhat reflexively took her hand.

I just barely managed to send Jacob and Remy a signal as I spotted them in the corner of my eyes. With that, I left without taking a single glance behind me, leading Alfina by the hand.

As I got closer to the tables, Dargan and Plura stopped their staring contest and let us through between them. Lilka and the others pretended that we were mediating and blocked off any gazes from behind us.

This sudden flood of information is getting me all wound up. First, I have to find a place to calm down.

*

"Let's wait here for a while."

After running into the school building from the courtyard, we ended up taking refuge in the library's archive. We came to a stop in front of the door to the director's office. And having just realized that I was still firmly holding her hand, I let go in a fluster.

"S-Sorry."

"It's alright. It was a relief to have you lead me here, Ricardo."

The sight of this girl illuminated by the skylight reminded me of the time I met her in this room, and the tender warmth that was lingering in my hand stimulated my memories of the dance.

"...I wonder if Clau and Louisa are alright," Alfina muttered in a concerned

tone.

I recalled what Claudia said before we left the tent. It was a situation dire enough for that knight to leave her precious princess to me. Well, if I had the time to think about such weird things, I was better off getting all this new information in order.

“Can I ask what exactly is going on here?” I asked in a dry voice.

Alfina went on to tell me about the welcoming party at the royal palace for the imperial envoys. Apparently, the prince went up to Alfina on the king’s orders just to give her a greeting, and when she tried to excuse herself afterward, he overbearingly tried to take her hand for a dance. Claudia had stepped in and stopped him at the time too.

Immediately after that, they received reports of a reaction from the crystal, and Alfina returned to the cathedral without any further problems.

“Well, that’s unforgivable... I mean, how high-handed of him.”

It really is an extremely unpleasant story... No, think about this rationally. It certainly is an extremely overbearing and unpleasant story. However, even so, Claudia and Louisa’s reaction earlier seemed to be excessive. Isn’t it more natural in that situation to just talk a little and give evasive answers?

At any rate, the one they were dealing with was an international problem. Even though it had been 40 years since the last war, there were still people alive who remembered the clash itself. On both sides, of course.

“...It has to do with what happened 20 years ago. One of the reasons my grandfather did such a thing was because he was instigated by the Empire... Even my mother said so...”

Alfina’s expression turned grim. What she spoke of was far more recent than the war 40 years ago. Considering the location of Felbach’s territory, it was possible that the Empire intervened. Even I had heard the rumors.

However, up until the suppression of the rebellion, and in the period after it was done, the Empire never made any overt moves. The peaceful relationship between the Empire and the Kingdom continued for 20 years since then.

But Alfina's mother was practically directly related to these events. There was definitely something there. Meaning... this pairing was one the royal palace absolutely did not want to get in contact with each other.

Contact with imperial royalty, regardless of the details, would only invite unwanted fear towards Alfina by the state. Dealing with the cleanup after the Felbach Rebellion must have been accompanied by a suitable amount of chaos and conflict. And the very symbol of all that was the girl standing before me. I could at least understand Claudia and Lousia's actions now.

"But it seems the prince is far more interested in Quell's Crystal than he is in my birthplace."

"It's certainly a possibility that the Empire desires information on the crystal as a means of predicting damage done by monsters..."

The eyes that prince had earlier certainly did give off the feeling of someone looking at a useful tool. The ability to predict the movement of monsters was something the Empire should have been coveting to the point where they would be trying to attain it by any means.

But was there any guarantee that Quell's Crystal could predict the movement of monsters?

Hang on... He mentioned an ancient magitech tool, and silverblood. Does that mean that the Empire knows a fair amount about the crystal itself? This isn't working. I can't make a judgment based on the information I have right now. This is a matter I should be thinking about together with Fulsig.

The first hypothesized problem I had to deal with was the prophecies of disaster. That was why I was developing the antenna together with Fulsig. But it was unknown whether that would be sufficient. Just the possibility of enemies appearing from within the state at the time of the next prophecy making a bid for its power was more than I wanted to deal with.

And now it's possible we even have enemies from outside the country... I'm severely lacking in information on the Empire. I wonder if Jacob and Remy will be able to get anything worthwhile from their investigations? Dammit, the more I try to put things in order, the more problems are overfilling the capacity of my brain.

“Ricardo?”

Coming back to my senses, I saw Alfina looking up at me anxiously.

It wouldn't be all that strange for a young man to be captivated by her regardless of the prophecy's power, would it? I wondered if the reason I was thinking about this was because she was so close that I could easily hold her in my arms from here.

“Um, sorry. My presence near you really is causing you nothing but trouble, isn't it...?” Alfina said as she cast her gaze to the floor.

Apparently, my silence had made her worried. Her platinum hair dangled down and brushed against her cheeks.

The faint sound of the hustle and bustle outside could be heard through the walls. It made me even more conscious of the silence here in this room with just the two of us in it.

How should I answer her? Actually, what stance should I even be taking with this girl? I realized that it was a little late for that while standing here, finding it difficult to come up with a reply.

At first, I couldn't think of her as anything but an inhabitant of an entirely different world. A princess was an existence who could decide on the entire fate of a commoner by pure whimsy. I decided that regardless of whether she would bring profit or harm, the sheer scale of what it would bring was too volatile for me to handle.

It didn't even need to be said that this was all in the past now. Just moments ago, I took her hand without a moment's hesitation. But now what?

Just being by her side was supposed to be impossible in the first place. And I wasn't referring to our social status. It was because we came from completely different worlds. Not that I could tell her so.

My memories from the other world spanned nearly 30 years. After coming here — not that I knew whether it was through reincarnation or teleportation or whatever it was to this very day — five years had passed. I was desperate in trying to adapt to this new world, so I had been affected by my physical age here. However, thinking about it carefully, I was now over 30 years old.

And this girl was just 16. I was acutely aware of the feelings of guilt I had towards her, feelings I didn't feel very much toward anyone else for this deception.

She was too close in age to be a daughter, not that I had any idea of what having a daughter was like. Alfina herself said I was something like an older brother, but we were far apart enough in age that she was more like a niece.

A niece... That doesn't seem so bad. If I actually did have a niece like this, I'm sure I would dote on her. Even as the coward that I am, I would want to protect her if I knew she was in danger. Of course, that's just how I feel personally, but in this case, it's not all that strange to want to stay by her side, right?

Even that dance didn't seem all that strange if you thought of it as acting as the escort to my niece's high society debut. That example felt even less real to me, though.

"Ah..."

This girl is my niece. My cute little niece.

Before I even knew it, my hand was touching her silky platinum hair. And just like that, I slowly moved my hand and patted her head.

"Umm, er... Ricardo. Fwah..."

"HUH?! Oh, um, well..."

I finally realized I was doing something far more impossible than what the imperial prince did. Alfina looked up at me with blushed cheeks.

"Please do not apologize. You mean to convey that you aren't avoiding me or anything of the sort, yes? That makes me happy. So, umm... Yes. Your hand brings me peace of mind as well."

I feel like holding her hand and petting her head were two entirely different things, but apparently Alfina was letting that pass. This must have been the pseudo-big brother power.

Peace of mind. Yup, peace of mind. Relief. That would've been dangerous if my mind hadn't settled on the uncle stance.

"Umm, right. Now to decide on how long to remain here... Miss Claudia may

be aware that this is where we ran off to, right?”

This was, in fact, the very spot where she drew her sword on me. That could be said to be the time that my self-preservation was under its most critical moment of duress. Though, I hoped she would let bygones be bygones out of respect for my gallant act today.

I loosened the tension in the air and moved the conversation along to what we should be doing next. This may have just been me postponing things in a sense, but I did think it was the best option in this situation.

However, Alfina averted her gaze ever so slightly.

“S-So ladies like Clau are to your liking, Ricardo?”

“...What?”

“You’re being kind to me now, but when I first approached you, you had a troubled expression... And conversely, you looked really relieved when Clau came...”

Oh, yeah, I totally did do that. Well, that’s awkward. I can’t even argue with her on that.

“You were also in favor when we were to have Clau return to my side. I am thankful for that... But Clau’s impolite behavior towards you was too excessive, and it was just on my mind a little...”

Oh, I get it. Alfina is reminiscing about what happened here before too.

“Th-That certainly was rather dangerous, but... um, she was simply doing her duty. I do think it would be best for you to put some faith in her, Princess Alfina. Just earlier, did she not also splendidly stop the imperial prince from taking a step forward...?”

I denied things as I waved both hands in the air. Thinking about it carefully, our roles should have been reversed. I should’ve been the one to say, “Don’t worry about me, take Princess Alfina and run.” Not that I could possibly do that. *Actually, why are we talking about this anyway?*

“Sorry. I don’t know why I...”

“So you *were* here after all.”

And with perfect timing, a dignified voice resounded through the archive.

“C-Clau. Are you alright?”

“There is no need for concern. Fortunately for us, His Highness the Third Prince came by shortly after and took over for us.”

“Prince Craig? He did that?”

The troubling matter had settled down. Apparently, I’d managed to escape both the imperial and royal princes.

“Miss Claudia, you truly were admirable in your refusal to step down before the imperial prince.”

If she had shown up just a little sooner, I would have been staring down her unsheathed blade once more. That fear made me reflexively suck up to her.

“That’s because I’ve decided to never abandon duty again... Also... Don’t get too conceited, Ricardo Weinder.”

I yielded my position at Alfina’s side over to Claudia. *It’s alright, I’m not getting conceited. She is my cute niece, after all.*

*

The second day went by free of any accidents... or at least it should have, but it came to an end regardless, and we went off to see the rankings.

“Hmph, looks like my shop is the top among the Food Court members,” Plura said boastfully.

The other members also rose to a good ranking. They were all sitting around number 10 out of the 24 total companies. Considering yesterday’s totals, one could say this was a huge success. It looked like the courtyard group had begun encroaching on the iron wall of the school building group. The gap between us and the Carlest’s forerunners sitting firmly at the top was still quite large though.

“The distance between the Carlest and Kendall groups has shrunk,” I said as I looked at the top of the list.

Incidentally, due to our allotment of shares in the Food Court, the Weinders

managed to escape from dead last.

Lilka then came back from her conversation with the Kendalls together with Ruston.

“Looks like it’ll work out,” she said.

“...It seems a shop that they know just happens to be fairly free. We also got a hold of some people who wanted to see things first hand,” Ruston added.

Not only did they secure more tables and chairs, they even acquired additional personnel. This must have been part of the Kendalls’ election campaign. *Keep it up and use that angle all you want. Now then, as for the next problem...*

“Will they try to start something?” Lilka asked.

“The possibility is certainly there.”

Tonight would be the most dangerous period. However, us Weinders didn’t have any physical goods for sale here. We had a jar of honey set inside our tent, but that was a decoy. We were hoping that they thought we’d be using the original value of honey to work out some sort of scheme on the final day.

We made sure that it was visible from outside the tent both yesterday and today for this exact purpose. It was somewhat painful to use our precious merchandise as a decoy, but we’d be able to protect the Food Court from striking out like this.

The Empire that I was so concerned about hadn’t shown any signs of drawing nearer after that, either. Apparently, they were getting all worked up talking to Prince Craig about his monster battles. Or so Hilda apparently said, in a truly vexed manner. Their visit was also limited to today.

I couldn’t let my guard down, but things would likely be fine during the festival itself. The only thing left to do was to verify Jacob and Remy’s intel.

Chapter 15: The Results of Gathering Information

“About this afternoon...”

After returning to the Weinder Company’s shop in the outer area of the capital, I asked Jacob about what went on today.

“Did you figure out something about that stupid prince...? I mean, the Empire?”

“About that... they actually ended up getting intel on us.”

“Wha— The Empire? Why?!”

We’re just a humble copper company. Did they mark me because of what happened in the afternoon?

“One of the third prince’s subordinates got in touch with me while they were all together.”

“...We’re just a little copper, dammit... Wait, how do they know your face?”

“They were apparently camping out near Reylia during the monster flood’s suppression, and investigated the Weinders during that time.”

“Drat... So?”

“He said something about wanting to talk to you again.”

“And of course, you refused, right?”

“Hell no. You think the guard of a humble copper company could do that? Still, thanks to that, we managed to match up what intel we had. I did figure some things out about that group in black.”

Jacob’s expression turned to that of a professional in an instant.

“First, they’re pros.”

“Pros? You mean they’re all experienced combat personnel? They were all pretty young, weren’t they? Since they’re the prince’s attendants, it means they’re all children of some big-wigs, right? I’m sure they get training to be a

guard at least...”

“They’re not the kinda mook that’s just there for show. How do I put it...? The imperial army has a doctrine of pure strength above and beyond what the Kingdom has. I’ve heard this from some retired vets from the war 40 years ago, and the prince’s subordinates were saying the same thing.”

“In other words, a large-scale generational shift has happened within the imperial army?”

“It’s possible.”

“The Empire hasn’t had any foreign wars since then, either. But their battles with monsters can’t even be compared to what we have here. It’s kind of like having monster floods all over the place every year, I guess? Be that as it may, would a member of the imperial family really be out fighting monsters?”

“Apparently the emperor has the land split up by ley lines and responsibility for them is left to each house in the region. Having said that, the imperial capital is surrounded by the domains of several other houses, so it should be the place under the least amount of threat from monsters.”

“So maybe there was a large-scale monster flood-like event near the center of the Empire which inflicted severe casualties on the original working generation?”

Meaning there was a possibility that the scale of monster activity was big enough that even the safest region couldn’t ignore it. It matched up with the stories I’d heard of the Empire being troubled for food. It could also explain their fixation with Alfina.

This matched our hypothesis that a large-scale fluctuation in the flow of mana was happening globally, based on the ley line activity that should never have occurred in the Kingdom.

Give me a break, there’s a possibility for a global crisis here. I can’t keep up with the self-preservation of the entire human race.

“...But from what I saw of them, they didn’t seem that hard-pressed.”

I couldn’t feel the tiniest amount of panic in the prince, or any of his

attendants. Are they bluffing? Or maybe they're influenced strongly by the top dog being with them? No... If my guess is on the mark, they shouldn't have the composure for that...

"One more thing. When that redhead got in their way, they took up combat postures, right? How do I put this...? Something felt out of place."

"Out of place?"

"Yeah. It's like their center of gravity was off... This is all intuitive, so I can't really explain it. Maybe it's just my imagination too. Anyway, that's about all I noticed."

"Got it. Good work. You can take the day off tomorrow, just as promised. Go out on a date with Remy or something."

"Aren't you the one going on dates, boss? Hmm? What about that little lady you brought along to Reylia? Her Highness herself. Your old man is gonna melt a hole through his stomach, you know?"

"It's alright. That's not what's going on with her."

"Hmm? If that's really true, then I guess Mia can relax a little. If that's true, that is."

Chapter 16: Featured Product

The third day of the Academy Festival, the last day of business.

As I entered my own tent in the morning, I carefully checked how things were inside. The crack on the jar of honey—the one Alfina damaged on her first social study day—as well as the wrapping for the lid, hadn't moved at all.

“No signs of sabotage. I thought they'd do something during the evening, if they were going to do anything at all...”

I came out of the tent in a somewhat anticlimactic mood. I could see our Food Court members carrying in ingredients to their cooking spaces for today's stock. And just as I started stretching out from that slight sense of relief...

“What are you doing?! W-Wait right there...!”

I could hear Plura yelling, along with the sound of something breaking towards the school building.

*

“What's going on, Plura? What's this? It's a total mess,” Dargan said.

As I ran over in a rush, all of our members had gathered in front of Plura's space. And sitting in the middle, with scrapes on his knees, was Plura, along with an overturned wooden box. It didn't just fall and break, there were traces of it being kicked too.

“I was receiving today's portions of berries, but while I was carrying them over, someone pushed me from behind. They were wearing merchant-like clothing, but I've never seen him before,” Plura said in a vexed tone.

He had the only surviving package in his arms, which were also scraped at his elbows. It appeared he managed to protect one of them.

“...I lost sight of him,” Ruston said upon coming back into the tent.

Apparently, he took chase after the man running towards the school gate upon hearing the commotion. This was the time of day where all ingredients were being carried around to each shop. There were merchants of all sorts

going about the school grounds. However, the man Ruston spotted didn't seem to have the armband marking his permission to enter.

"Why was Plura targeted...?" I mumbled.

Wouldn't it make more sense to target the copper managing the Food Court? Or even the companies under the Kendall umbrella?

"The top company under the Carlest umbrella is the Boulbernie Company. They're a confectionery. We're the ones in direct competition with them. I was being careful, but I was still far too naïve. I didn't think they'd go this far."

"Oh."

I recalled the information I heard from Lilka. Theirs would be the sweets that Hilda loved that the Carlests were bragging about. So their target was the one who was most effective to hit and far easier to lay their hands on than any of the Kendalls...

"There's only one box left, huh? Even if we tried stocking up more berries now..." Dargan grunted in frustration.

Easily perishable foods were circulated in particularly limited quantities. This applied even more to the high-quality berries used for confections.

Juices were seeping out of the broken box on the floor, and a sweet acidic aroma filled the air.

"At this rate, the one-plate lunch can't possibly..." Shirley said, as she began picking up the ruined berries that had fallen out of the box.

With this, we wouldn't be able to make the dessert which topped off the dish. If our featured product, the edible menu, were to vanish, it would deal severe damage to the entire Food Court. *Dammit, I'm really getting fed up with my repeated chain of carelessness.*

I brought my clenched fist up to my brow. Dargan and Lilka also looked glum. Even Ruston looked like he was blaming himself for letting the one who did this get away.

"Hmph. What's with the long faces?"

The biggest victim, on the other hand, was smiling boldly. He stood up and

showed us the box in his hands. Now that I think of it, why did he go so far just to protect that one box?

Plura opened the box, revealing the small red berries within.

“I managed to safeguard the share for the lunches.”

“Hah! Son of a bitch. That ain’t like you at all, dammit.”

“Plura...”

What’s going on? These members were only supposed to be united by their personal interests and their animosity towards the Carlests’ tyranny. Even my own goal here was just to use the Academy Festival as a testing grounds for the stock system. So when exactly did they all...?

“I suppose I can use the leftover berries to make a mixed berry sauce to offer up the minimum level of merchandise... The Plura company menu will lack in variety, though... I’ll need to talk this out with the head chef...”

Plura quickly began thinking up plans for getting his own shop back into working order. *Now then, what’s my role here? I guess the first thing to think of is a way to retaliate against the culprit who brought this on. Not the perpetrator themselves mind you, I mean the puppet master pulling the strings behind them. My strategic target is the one who took on such an overbearing and violent method to accomplish their goals.*

“Mia.”

“Yes?”

“Go get that from our tent. Let’s see... Just one bottle will do.”

Mia cocked her head to the side for a moment, but she seemed to have guessed what I was getting at from the way I was looking at Lilka and Ruston.

“Sir? I think it might be a little different from what you’re thinking, but I do have one suggestion. There’s something I’d like you to prepare alongside Lilka and Ruston.”

And so, I called out to Plura and the other members around him.

“It’s just like you said, boss. Just about all we can use the crushed berries for is to make sauce.”

I brought Lilka and Ruston along over to Plura’s kitchen. A bear-like man dressed like a chef was in there stirring a pot.

“So, what’s this proposition of yours...?” Plura asked.

“I have a simple recipe for a treat. Could you try it out for me?”

I got eggs and milk from Lilka, and bread from Ruston. I then lined them up on the kitchen table, along with a small jar that Mia brought over.

A short while later, a deep and sweet aroma filled the narrow kitchen.

“With such simple ingredients and preparation...?”

“I see...”

The head chef and Plura were both at a loss for words after tossing the golden baguette into their mouths. All I did was teach them how to make it, by the way. You really had to give it to the pros; it was better than what I made, even though this was his first try.

The slight stiffness that remained could likely be addressed somehow or other by letting it soak a little longer. The accent of the walnut-like nuts gave it a nice touch too.

“It certainly is delicious. But the fact that yellow is the only visible color makes it somewhat insufficient for high-class goods... Just adding some berry sauce to it won’t match the strong taste of the recipe either...”

“So how about adding a whole lot of this right on top of it?”

I opened the jar that Mia brought over. It was filled with a viscous amber liquid; this was our copper honey. It was quite ironic that it was the first time during the festival that I was doing something more in line with my principal occupation.

“Honey would make it high class, huh?” The head chef dipped the tip of his spatula into the jar and gave it a taste. “It’s got a docile aroma for honey. Seems like this’ll be easy to use for confections.”

Everyone gave the pain perdu another taste after smothering it in honey. Lilka capitulated immediately, saying, “It’s so sweet I could die from happiness.”

“...It’s a little different from our usual style, but this powerful sweetness is certainly a valid dessert to follow up after the delicate one-plate lunch,” Plura said with a nod.

Okay, with that, our ace in the hole is ready for the final day.

*

“It’s amazing! Look! Those uppity nobles are forming a queue! It’s unbelievable!” Lilka exclaimed as she watched the customers waiting in the passageway under the midday sun.

We doubled the seating capacity of the Food Court, and that was now full. We were attracting people quite actively from both the school building and the gazebos on either side of us. We even had customers seated at simple desks that we only threw a tablecloth over.

“I saw the two Carlests in the school building earlier. They were utterly beside themselves,” I said.

“I’m looking forward to the rankings, given this momentum. But was that really the wisest option? Wasn’t that a valuable recipe...?”

“That’s simply the obligation of the one managing the Food Court, Plura.”

“The price you sold us the honey at is practically the same as handing it out for free, too.”

“That’s our fair and reasonable pricing. It *is* copper honey, after all.”

“Really? The rich scent of honey makes it difficult to use, depending on the confection being made. However, the honey you sell doesn’t have that sort of eccentricity. Would it be possible for us to procure some later?”

“We plan on ramping up our production after this is over, so it should be fine. I’ll talk it over with my father. But first...”

“Yeah, we have to do something about this rush. Hahaha, it’s like this is the very center of the festival now.”

I looked at the overflowing Food Court together with Plura, as we then split off to the sides grinning.

Now then, we managed to crush our opponent's plans. Now we just had to obstruct them from doing anything more. I had asked Claudia to intensify the patrols around the courtyard for Alfina's sake. As for the last matter...

*

Business hours for the final day ended an hour earlier than on the previous days. The Food Court members looked like they were leaning on the parasols in exhaustion. Mia and I cleaned up the last one, but we were nowhere near as spent as the others. Besides, I still had work left to do.

I headed towards the director's office with some pain perdu as a gift, and asked Fulsig about the results of his experiment. In terms of coins, the Weinders were the bottom of the pack among our holding's members, Lilka's was dead center, and Plura profited the most. We began by matching our results against those three to determine the accuracy of the experiment.

I then headed towards the student council room. The Kendall siblings were together with our now revived Food Court members.

"You really saved us by lending those tables and chairs." I started by thanking Jean and Maria.

"I took a look near the end. It must have been unimaginable that the nobles formed a queue, yes?" Maria replied.

"Both the one-plate lunch and the new confection were the talk of the town... Anyway, looks like you got here a little late. What were you doing?" Jean asked as he lowered his voice.

Can you not put it in a way that makes it sound like I'm scheming some manner of conspiracy at every chance that I get? At any rate, I went on to explain the aim of the experiment I was doing together with Fulsig.

"What a thing to do... You thought that far ahead from the very beginning?"

"It's just insurance. It'd be best if things end without having to put it to use. There *was* that incident in the morning, though," I said in as composed a

manner as I could.

The Carlests intended to interfere with us, but the situation turned out more like prodding a snake out of a bush. We ended up pulling in quite a number of customers thanks to the brand-new treat in the courtyard.

“The culprit was never caught. That really is strange. The patrols around the school gate are supposed to be reinforced by the guards of the upper-class district under the cooperation of the guilds. So how did an outsider get in and out without permission...?” Jean said.

“Wait, hang on. If you think about it carefully, it’s entirely possible. You listening? The one charged with paying the expenses of the upper-class district’s guards is the guilds. And...”

“I get it now. The Culinary Guild is the largest of all guilds, so you’re saying it’s the executives of said guild,” Maria concluded.

“You have a point. There are bad rumors going around about the Carlests. They pestered the former Dreyfan umbrella companies in cruel ways to absorb them all in as their own. So if the culprit wasn’t caught...” Jean added.

So that’s how it’s set up? Both the legal organization behind public safety and the illegal organization behind the violence joined together. It was entirely possible. There would be quite the strong connection between them, too.

The Carlest siblings recognized us as a clear threat yesterday evening. That’s why they sent someone to get in our way the next morning. But that meant...

“So the parents have come into their children’s fight...”

*

After regrouping with the others, we headed to the student council room. Everyone was making a fuss in front of the ranking table.

The multi-colored rankings had taken on the form of three stacked colors. The one in the center was a blue bland. This was of course the shops of our Food Court that managed to bite into the upper ranks.

I verified the numbers placed beside each of our shops’ names. There was nothing out of the ordinary here. Everything lined up with our own account

books.

“Among the independent companies, we’re lined up right at the top, huh?” Dargan commented to Plura.

“These are the results based on our abilities. There’s nothing to make a fuss about.”

Below their names, there was a single unreliable blue line in the middle of a red band. The Weinders placed just around the lower third. We managed to get this far just from our share from the Food Court as well as the fee we charged the Pluras for our recipe and honey.

The glares of the silvers who placed below me were terrifying, though. *Don’t worry, I’ve made sure that all of you will keep your honor. Please believe in my sense of self-preservation.*

“Me, Shirley, and Ruston all placed better than last year too. Weinder, you probably could’ve placed better if you took some earnings from the one-plate lunch as the company which offered the idea, couldn’t you?”

“It’s fine. I’m not interested in the rankings.”

I had the state of the Food Court’s operations passed to Euphylia through Alfina and Louisa. The Weinders’ true goal here was a practical show of the stock system. The experience of managing and gathering multiple different companies to work together was also beyond valuable for getting ready for the formation of my general trading company. The only problem was that our members were far too talented for a proper sample.

“Oh, come on... Well, whatever. Anyway, what do you think of that?”

Lilka lowered her voice. The fraud we were most wary of didn’t happen. To us, at least.

However, the three top names on the list were exactly the same as yesterday — three companies under the Carlest umbrella.

“We monitored the Carlest-related shops. I would estimate they had 20 to 30 percent less customers than yesterday. Especially the Boulbernie company, being in direct competition with Plura. It wouldn’t be all that strange if Plura

actually surpassed them in terms of coins,” Jean muttered.

I see, so it's padded by 30 percent. That just happens to match the results of our experiments.

The prime minister's grandson then entered the student council room, accompanied by three noble students. Shortly after, they called on all participants to enter. I exchanged looks with Jean, and we entered the room.

Chapter 17: Ranking Announcement

The student council room was set up as a square conference room using a long desk. The vice president, Leonardo, sat at the innermost part in the center with his three clerks. At his signal, all the participants for this year's festival took their seats.

The Carlest companies sat on the left side, with the two Carlest siblings at their center. The Kendall companies sat on the right, with Maria and Jean at their center. Myself, Mia, Plura and Dargan also ended up sitting with them, going with the flow of things.

The remaining empty seats were filled by companies which didn't deal in food or drinks. And one student who was formerly under the Dreyfan umbrella but was now independent sat in the last seat very awkwardly.

After everyone was seated, Alfina and Hilda entered the room.

"Regardless of being blessed with so much space, you did a splendid job in managing an area of the festival for the first time, Alfina. I'm quite impressed."

Hilda praised Alfina, giving off the air that she was only doing it for form's sake. *Is that so? The courtyard was prime real estate, was it?*

"It is all thanks to you for charging me with such a wonderful location to supervise, President Hilda."

"I-I see. It looks like things will be fine here after I graduate." Hilda's face cramped at Alfina's response, seeing that it was completely devoid of any ill intentions.

The courtyard was supposed to be occupied by a single lonely cart. But it ended up flourishing with activity thanks to the one-plate lunch and the pain perdu. I was sure everything ran counter to her expectations.

"Now then, before we move on to the closing festivities, let's recap the results of the shops in general. This year's Academy Festival was truly a success. First—"

Leonardo began revealing all the results of the festival as a whole in an

inoffensive manner. In short, the donations received by the Academy this year were fairly major.

Apparently, the rules that drove out the middling companies, and opening the bids on small rooms afterward, were all recorded as the student council's achievements. The efforts of the commercial world were all sucked up by politics as taxes. A truly wonderful microcosm of society itself.

"The earnings from the courtyard on the final day were especially notable," Leonardo added with a businesslike tone.

Hilda's face twisted slightly in displeasure for just an instant, but she kept her silence.

"As a special case participant, although it took on a peculiar shape, your work on the shop called the Food Court was quite surprising, Weinder. Your rank wasn't all that high, but you still surpassed several silver companies, despite being a copper."

He gave me an unexpectedly proper assessment. *But please don't look down on me. Those of the self-preservation party are wary of all statements made about them, be it praise or disparagement. I guess that's just my distrust in humanity. But seeing that the older Carlest is snickering to himself, I suppose you could say it's my faith in humanity.*

Leonardo was adding on all kinds of prefaces like "special case" and "peculiar shape" as well. Hilda was quietly listening to my praises being sung, but was now urging Leonardo to hurry up with her gaze.

"...However, there have been complaints raised regarding the fact that you are a special exception, and towards the way your shop was managed."

"Complaints, you say? Umm, what do you mean by that? I managed a shop in the courtyard under the direction of both of you in the student council, did I not?"

I made a show to look as bewildered as possible. Apparently, they had quite some interest in my bad inventory. *In truth, I'd do this for free. But I am a merchant. I'll put in the effort to sell it for as high a price as I can.*

"Was it not your personal order to liven things up in the courtyard? Did I

make some manner of mistake?”

First, I needed to go on the attack. Hilda averted her gaze at my comment, while Leonardo looked back at me with a cramped smile.

“Yes, and liven it up you did. We went over there ourselves earlier today, and you truly did your best with what you were given. We of the student council also recognize this.”

Leonardo paused and took a glance over to Alfina.

“However, even if it was not a proper room, you never paid a participation fee. Furthermore, it seems that you occupied more space than two classrooms put together on the final day. So, because of that...”

Theodore rose to his feet and interrupted.

“The earnings of the Weinder Company’s shop came from an outside source. The ones who paid him were the other shops who participated. Am I wrong?”

I see, he at least put some thought into it. The coins guests exchanged their money for were pure profit for the Academy. However, the usage fees of the Food Court were paid by exchanging money between fellow companies, using the coins received from our customers.

“It’s strange to put it that way. Just as Vice President Leonardo said, the invigoration of business in the courtyard was Weinder’s contribution. In other words, he devoted himself to increasing the profits of the Academy Festival itself.” Jean rose to his feet and faced off against Theodore.

The Carlests and Kendalls stared each other down. Tension ran through the room. I saw the student council president half rise to her feet, ready to break the balance. *Okay, it’s time to genuinely start our negotiations.*

“I understand what you are saying, Vice President Leonardo. In short, the Weinders did nothing more than manage a shop, in accordance with what we were authorized to do. However, considering how it was a special case, and the form our management took, it is not appropriate to evaluate our contributions using the same standards as the other companies. Is that what you mean?”

“Y-Yes, that’s precisely my point,” Leonardo replied as he wiped his glasses.

He averted his gaze from me. The ones who were intently staring at my reaction were actually the poor participants who were surpassed by a copper. The shop rankings during the Academy Festival were to be announced to noble society, as well as within the Academy itself. These companies feared the continuous ridicule they could face for losing to a copper.

I don't have the time to keep your envy company, though. I also need to make allies of all the neutral students here to accomplish what I'm going to be starting shortly.

"Hmm, thinking about it once more, I do believe I understand what you are getting at. As the vice president, exceptions to the rule should be excluded. That is what you're thinking, right?" I asked Leonardo with a bitter expression.

We found our common ground. That's what I want him to think.

"That's right. The rankings should be determined as fairly as possible."

The grandson of a bureaucrat, and probably also the son of one, got on board.

"Yeah! Furthermore, that should also apply to—"

"In that sense, the shops who made use of the courtyard should be evaluated even higher, I suppose. I was basically taking a cut from them, after all. Hahaha."

I cut off Zeldia before she could drag in the other participants of the Food Court. They were fully intent on finding fault with Lilka and the others using the momentum of complaints with our management system as a kickstarter.

Complaints came up against the unprecedented system of the Food Court. This was well within my predictions. But I wasn't going to let the criticism that I basically bought my rank spread to the other members. Next, I needed to accomplish my responsibility as the Food Court's manager.

"...Very well. From my perspective, I had the privilege of going through a valuable experience during the festival. Therefore, I will excuse myself from being included in any public announcements of the rankings, in order to adhere to the fair rules. Will that be sufficient?" I said to Leonardo, emphasizing the fair rules.

“If you are in agreement with that, then I don’t see a problem. Very well, we shall exclude you from the official rankings. We’re expecting much of you next year, Weinder.”

Leonardo seemed to be quite relieved. To him, the fact that I declined on my own was likely everything he could hope for.

“Y-You’re right. Even though you did your best, it is difficult to say you were given the same conditions as the others when relying on other companies for your profits. Let’s bring the discussions of Weinder’s accomplishments to an end here.” Hilda somehow kept up appearances as she brought the topic to an end.

It felt like she took much more of a hit from this than Leonardo did. It was only appropriate to set one’s target on an enemy’s weakest point. However, one could not make light of that weakness either.

Things then moved on to the official announcement of the rankings, excluding myself.

“All three of the top spots this year went to companies under the Carlest umbrella. The top-ranking Boulbernie Company in particular received great praise from our visitors.”

“Indeed. I visited the shop for myself. The taste of the new cheesecake unveiled for the Academy Festival was truly superb.”

Leonardo pulled himself together and went on to praise the Carlest participants who monopolized the podium, and Hilda clearly showed her partiality.

“Please wait a moment. I have doubts regarding the earnings of the top ranks,” Jean said as he raised his hand.

He then went on to explain the state of customers who entered those shops. Putting it simply, it was strange that the number of customers decreased by 30 percent, yet their earnings remained exactly the same.

All the participants began murmuring.

“Could you cut the slander? Do you think you can overturn the fact that

you're playing second fiddle to our group using such baseless claims? Know your place!" Theodore roared back.

Leonardo pushed his glasses up with his finger in displeasure.

"Claims of fraud regarding any accounting should certainly not be spoken of without proof. The number of coins has been confirmed by the student council. Could you provide us with some precise evidence?"

"Indeed, it's just as he says," Hilda quickly added.

The president's eyes wandered for just a moment, but the vice president had full faith in himself. Leonardo was likely the one who personally confirmed the count. *How awe-inspiring of the duke's grandson. He's likely thinking that nobody could possibly doubt him. He's certainly right too. That stands to reason for us commoner students. Even the teachers would likely hesitate to do so. A normal teacher would, at least.*

"Could you excuse me for a moment?"

The door to the student council room opened with a creak. Everyone's gaze gathered on the entrance, and an old man with a white beard entered the room. He had his antenna in one hand, and a bundle of papers in the other. It was truly a surreal scene.

"Oh my, if it isn't the Great Sage. Is something the matter? Oh, I almost forgot. We must express our gratitude to you for the special lecture you gave under the student council's sponsorship," Hilda said to him.

It seemed the lecture that Fulsig was grumbling about all this time was the president's idea. She was apparently trying to fortify Fulsig's position as the one responsible for the suppression of the monster flood to weaken Alfina's position in the Academy. In a sense, her great efforts could delude me into thinking she was my ally.

"That's not what I'm here for. Could I just have you verify the results of a little experiment of mine?"

"Verify the results of an experiment...? What is it...?" Leonardo asked in confusion.

“I’m actually developing a new measurement device to more accurately predict the possibility of a monster flood, you see. So I used the festival this time around to run a little test of my prototype.”

Fulsig held up his antenna, which looked like a ramen bowl with a lotus flower as a lid.

“How wonderful. It was thanks to your measurements that the previous disaster was well and truly prevented. I would be honored to be of any use. What should we do?” Hilda asked with a nod.

“It’s simple. Those boxes there are filled with coins that have mana running through them, right? I’ll take measurements of the coins within and predict how many there are, then I’d like you to tell me the actual number.”

“M-My... I see. If that is all, we already have the totals. Vice President?”

“Understood.”

The two student council members showed no signs of unrest. Leonardo obediently handed the documents with the numbers written on them over to Fulsig.

“Hang on, I need to measure these first. Let’s see... I guess for the conditions I’m looking for, I’ll use the strongboxes from the shops that were in the classrooms...”

Fulsig pointed his antenna at a strongbox and began recording the results. He then went on to compare his results with the student council’s records with his wrinkled eyes. The student council room had fallen into complete silence at the sudden sideshow.

After finishing, Fulsig shook his head.

“How strange... Several of the strongboxes don’t conform to my measurements. There isn’t enough mana for the number of coins in there,” he said as he cocked his head to the side.

“Which strongboxes are showing strange readings?” I asked Fulsig to prod him.

“Mhm. Specifically, numbers three and five. Also... number eight. These three

have less mana in them than the number of recorded coins. All the other ones are a complete match, though... The one with the biggest gap is number eight here.”

“The Great Sage’s results coincide with the stores I brought up earlier. Number eight is the Boulbernie Company.”

Jean repeated his earlier complaint with this as additional evidence. Those three boxes coincided exactly with our three podium members. The Carlest siblings had completely stiffened up, and the three students lined up next to them looked at their bosses with pleading eyes.

“Th-This must be some sort of mistake. You did say that this was but a prototype,” Zeldia exclaimed as she sent emergency signals over to Hilda.

“Sh-She’s right. I do not want to believe that someone would try to do such a thing. We are using specially made coins, so such fraud cannot be accomplished in the first place. Oh, yes! All we need do, then, is open the strongboxes and count the coins.”

The president was more long-winded than she was until now. But it was clear she was still confident.

“I see. I’d be grateful if you could. This is still a prototype, after all. It’s only normal that measurement errors could occur.”

“Understood. Then allow us to count them up here.”

Leonardo opened the strongboxes together with his subordinate. They began with three of the strongboxes where the results were a match. Fulsig’s predicted numbers fell within just a few coins of the actual count.

As for the Carlests’ top three companies...

“The number of coins does coincide with what was reported...” Leonardo said to Fulsig in a restrained tone.

“Hmmm. I suppose this still requires adjustments... No, hang on, maybe this actually is a match.”

Fulsig clapped his hands, then pulled out a coin from his pocket. It was the same one he showed me before, the one he didn’t give back last year.

“This is a coin that was cast aside after it was filled with mana last year. Lend me one of the coins from the strongbox where the numbers matched.”

Leonardo handed a coin over to Fulsig.

“And this is a coin that was filled with mana this year. There’s about a 30 percent difference in the strength of the mana between these two coins. Using some simple numerology, if a third of the coins are actually old, there would be about a 10 percent difference in the mana measured from the whole strongbox. Next... Could you hand me 20 or so coins from that strongbox where the results don’t match?”

Fulsig pointed at the top-ranking strongbox. He then began measuring the twenty coins one at a time. I took a look around at the complexion of our two student council members and the two Carlest siblings. I needed to guess who took part in this, and how, now that I could.

Leonardo looked like he’d had enough of this. However, Hilda was clearly behaving suspiciously. The two Carlests were also exchanging glances anxiously. The top ranker of the Carlests looked about as white as a ghost. There was one more too... One of the clerks looked a little pale.

“So I’m right. About a third of the coins in this strongbox didn’t have their mana refilled.”

“I-Impossible. Every single coin exchanged to our visitors was definitely topped off completely. And all the excess coins that weren’t are under the jurisdiction of the student—”

Leonardo came to a complete stop. The image of Hilda, who was averting her gaze, and one of his subordinates, was reflected in his glasses.

Hilda had threatened one of the clerks or something, and they illegally diverted the coins out of the stockpile. *I guess that’s more or less how it went down. It’s quite the crude move, but considering the timing with which the Carlests identified us as a threat, they had no choice but to be somewhat unreasonable.*

Silence hung over the student council room. The number 30 percent lined up with Jean’s accusation earlier. Just from that, it was clear to everyone in the

room that something happened.

Everything is fine up until here. The problem now is who to hound, and how far to push them. My first target is the Carlests. Hilda ended up entangling her goal of having the Carlests win with her goal of showing contempt for Alfina, and she failed for it. As the weaker party, I won't make the same mistake. My target is, at most, the Carlests.

"There are still the closing festivities to attend to, so the investigation of these results should be left for—" Hilda tried to forcefully pull down the curtain, but I rose to my feet and cut her off.

"That can't be! That's far too cruel! I excluded myself from the rankings just to adhere to the rules so that a fair ranking could be determined!" I exclaimed towards Leonardo.

"...That's certainly true."

The show I made of personally excluding myself presented its value right here. Leonardo now found it difficult to deny my righteous indignation at having to tearfully part ways with the precious honor the rankings would have provided.

This was, in fact, simply the standard for a judge's sentence. I didn't do anything wrong, but I was excluded from the rankings so that the fairness of the rules could be preserved. So, what should be done in the event of fraud?

"The three shops who placed at the top will be excluded from the official... No, they'll be disqualified entirely," Leonardo concluded.

Zeldia looked to Hilda for help, but she was ignored. Leonardo didn't even look at Theodore.

However, I still wasn't done.

"Just who could have committed such fraud...? Oh, I know. Great Sage?"

"Y-Yes? What is it?"

Fulsig apparently got the jitters from my realistic acting, and replied in a flustered tone.

"I am but a simple commoner, so I don't know the first thing about mana.

However, with your abilities, would it be possible to tell who brought the coins out of the stockpile using the traces of mana left within them?" I asked, knowing full well he couldn't. Both Hilda and one of the clerks trembled.

"...Uhh, let's see... Mhm, it may be possible if my research goes further." Fulsig somehow managed to keep up the show.

"Once filled, the coins retained a certain level of mana for a long time, didn't they? This should also apply to those traces, right? If we are to properly store the coins from this case, then would the evidence remain until your research progresses further?" I continued with the charade, and Fulsig nodded ambiguously.

"I-I feel sorry for requesting such trifling work of an authority on wizardry renowned throughout the Kingdom." Hilda desperately tried to change the course of the conversation.

"Nothing of the sort. This will be of great use to my research. I can't guarantee it will go well anyways. You don't need to mind me." Fulsig replied to her with the very face of a good-natured old man.

"So the Great Sage says himself. How about making this an official request of the student council? Also, we could have the three companies guilty of fraud cover the research costs as punishment using the sum of the fraudulent coins." That was as far as I took this.

"No way... There's still no clear evidence..." Zeldia remained in opposition to my idea.

Good grief. I'm actually being quite kind here. This is all a profit for me, so I settled on the punishment only affecting your honor, and you still have the gall to complain?

"What do you think of my proposal, Miss President?"

I ignored Zeldia and pointed my gaze at the Archduke's pale daughter. Hilda's lips were already trembling, preventing her from speaking. *Don't worry, you're not my target.* I softened my expression, and smiled at Hilda.

"How about the student council takes responsibility for storing those coins until the Great Sage's research completes?"

A noble, just, impartial, and fair role, befitting of the student council president. She *definitely* wasn't going to try to cover anything up, so this wasn't hush money. The archduke's daughter seemed to understand what I was getting at. She steadily raised her head, and somehow let the tension out of her cheeks.

"That's... Right... I see... Yes, a wonderful suggestion. Please, by all means, could we ask this of you, Great Sage? Oh yes, seeing that this is a request of the student council, my family shall also offer funds for your research."

Hilda shot a look at the two Carlests. *I see, so the ones actually paying will be them. "Money has no color," so they say. Not that it matters to me.*

"Haha, well, that's appreciated."

Fulsig laughed in great humor. We managed to secure research funds from investors who hoped that we would fail in a sense. It really was quite comical.

I managed to sell the ranking I didn't even want for quite the sum, didn't I?

*

Well, I guess the results turned out alright.

I nodded as I took a look at the readjusted rankings. The top three Carlest companies were disqualified, and the new rankings had Plura in first with Dargan in third. Second place still belonged to one of the Carlest companies, but there was nobody left who believed any of their rankings.

Maybe I went a little too far, though. I had completely made myself an enemy of the Carlests. In any case, the main branch went on to desperately protect their position as the sponsors for the closing festivities with enough fervor that it seemed like they were ready to cut loose their child companies.

They just managed to get by thanks to Hilda wanting to protect the main Carlest branch, as well as Leonardo's desperation to somehow get the closing festivities to actually happen. Not that the siblings' reputation could recover with just this much in the business world. The hostile gazes they pointed at me were rather intense.

I planned on running away to my position as a company under the

sponsorship of Euphylia, but would that even be enough? I had gotten the two student council members to settle down for now, but how would they take action once they regained their footing...?

“...About the information you asked for. I spoke to my father, and we will prepare everything that we can.”

Jean whispered to me as he pretended to walk past me and headed towards the neutral students together with Maria.

Well, I guess I'll leave the Carlests to their rival gold company. I fulfilled my promise of cooperating with the guild representative elections. If they managed to use this to secure a position as a candidate, they would surely be able to keep their position as deputy representative and maintain enough power to oppose the Carlests.

Chapter 18: Closing Festivities

A splendid building with an arched ceiling lay next to the school gate. It was the largest single space within the entire Academy. It wasn't all that different from the sort of large auditoriums in Japan that were used for entrance ceremonies, graduations, and the like.

On the final evening of the Academy Festival, the interior of the building had been decorated for one such large event. Actually, it was decked out even more than that. Pale blue curtains were set up over the windows, fluttering about gently as if to match the color of the wind. Ornaments on the wall were placed next to them to contrast the colors. A thick carpet, adorned with flowers here and there, was spread across the floor.

The scene before me was well beyond the closing festivities of a school event, and this was before the festivities had even begun.

I looked over this from behind the curtains on the stage deep within the auditorium.

"It's quite extravagant, isn't it?"

"Well, it's meant to be a party for the major donors of the Academy and the nobles who lavishly spent their money during the festival itself. The parents of the commoner students are also gathered here, aiming to talk with those attendees."

An upperclassman stood next to me and answered my candid comment. He was one of the sponsors for this event, the heir to the Kendalls.

"I see, so that's why they're all so enthusiastic."

I looked at our student council president standing in the middle of the venue. Hilda went out of her way to get changed for the evening party. Her beauty certainly did shine in this kind of setting; that violet dress she wore really did suit her.

A little further away from her, Leonardo was still in his uniform, giving orders to the other student council members. They were headed toward two rows of

long white tables in the auditorium.

The two Carlest siblings were at the table further to the back, somehow having regained their willpower, giving orders to their own employees.

Maria was at the other table making preparations for the banquet as well.

Carlest vs. Kendall.

The confrontation of gold companies aiming to be the next guild representative was about to begin. In other words, this was where the real showdown started.

*

Clearly distinguished men and women began pouring in one after the other through the entrance. The seats at the Carlest table in the back were packed, while the Kendall table was sparsely filled out. *I see, there's far less "play" here than there was with the festival shops. And that was for all the parents of the commoners — in other words, the merchants of the Kingdom — to see.*

"I still need to clean up the rest of the Food Court, so I'd like to get going already..."

"Please wait just a little longer. Look, he's here."

The last one to come in was a stylish middle-aged man accompanied by a girl younger than the students of the Academy. *I don't know who he is, but I feel like I've seen the girl somewhere before...*

"He's the one you talked about." Jean pointed his gaze at this man.

"I don't know who that is, though...?"

"Haah... It looks like you really aren't lying. That's Duke Aleberg. The duke from the central region."

Well, that's quite the bigwig. The stylish man with a soft demeanor quickly had a gathering of nobles building up around him, to whom he responded with a gentle smile. The one to come forth with both arms spread in a grandiose manner was none other than Hilda, flanked by the two Carlests. The three of them began guiding the duke towards the seats in the back as if it were a matter of course.

However, the girl accompanying the duke pulled on his sleeve. And then, as if dragged along by her, he sat down at the less populated table. In other words, he sat on the Kendalls' side. A small sense of agitation ran through the venue. The gazes of the merchants who were previously focused on the filled Carlest seats were now all gathered on the duke.

"We didn't get anything close to a positive response, no matter how we tried to approach him. But it seems the rumors of the junos's aroma, along with your recipe for the pain perdu, reached his ears. The young lady with him is the duke's sister's daughter, I think."

Now that I think of it, that girl came by this morning and ordered pain perdu before anyone else could.

"Junos can be procured by Ruston, and we received an offer from Plura for the recipe. Of course, I plan on giving you a suitable reward as well."

Plura mentioned that the Kendalls came to him about the recipe. How honest of them. Both Lilka and Ruston were there when it was being made. Personally, I planned on making it available to the public together with all the members who cooperated.

"Finally, we've got a real fight on our hands... Just how far ahead were you planning?"

"Like I've said from the beginning, I only thought as far as livening up the courtyard. That was also mostly thanks to the abilities of our members."

He did mention that Aleberg was a man of hobbies. But I didn't have the leisure to really think about it at the time. Jean simply shrugged his shoulders at my implication that it would actually be quite terrifying if I did plan for this. He then parted ways with me in order to go and greet the duke, and I left the building through the back door.

It was quite dark out earlier, but now the moon hung over the sky as I headed towards the courtyard. Guards were standing at the gate, wearing different uniforms from the ones who were around during the festival. I suppose they were from the noble district.

"Even the quality of the police differs with the land, huh? I guess it's

inevitable, considering the different scales of taxes... That just goes to show how the sponsors are still no match for them.”

I looked at the guards, as bitter memories came back to me. I was unable to foresee the close relationship between the guards of the upperclass district and the guild’s deputy representative. If the Carlests were to become the representative, I would have to be extra careful about that.

Well, I guess I should be alright if I make a public show of being Euphylia’s asset. But I was still a little worried about our members being marked as a clear enemy of the Carlests because of what happened. Their shops happened to be in the upperclass district.

I turned the corner around the school building and came upon the courtyard that was just waiting to be cleaned up.

“It sure is lively.”

Dargan and Plura were both boasting about their shops. Plura was bragging about being the top rank among all the members, while Dargan kept retorting that it was only because he got a recipe from his junior.

Next to him, Lilka, Shirley, and Mia were eating French toast. Seeing my dear secretary doing such a thing, she truly looked just like a normal schoolgirl.

They must have been having a closing party of their own. It was much more like a party for a school festival over here. I looked over the group in a somewhat nostalgic mood.

Mia spotted me, and came over carrying a cup. It seemed to be hot water with honey and junos. *Not bad at all.*

“Where’s Princess Alfina?”

“She came by to greet everyone earlier. I think she’s still in her tent.”

“I see.”

Right, time to offer up my final thanks as the manager of the Food Court, not to mention answer a certain question of hers as well.

I headed towards the still lit tent. It really was like her to so faithfully stay behind.

“Pardon the intrusion.”

I peeked into the open tent. Both Alfina and Alicia were inside. The maid covered her mouth, having just stuffed golden bread in her face, as she stood up and moved in front of Alfina. She had one cheek puffed out like a chipmunk, but I didn't point it out. Both Louisa and Claudia were missing. She was likely being wary because of that.

“How was the auditorium, Ricardo?”

“It was quite lively, so I slipped away. Are you not participating, Princess Alfina?”

“It's my duty to supervise the courtyard, so I thought to look over it to the very end.”

If Alfina were to sit down at the same table as Duke Aleberg, it would carry far too profound a meaning behind it. If that were seen as the intent of her guardian, Archduchess Euphylia, it would possibly even drive the duke from his seat.

Let's drop the politics talk right there, I've had enough of that boorish closing festivity.

“Are you not bored, being cramped up in this tent for such a time?”

I asked her exactly what was on my mind. I had her fulfill her role of attracting customers during the entire festival. There was also the matter with the Empire the other day, and accompanying Hilda must have been quite tiring.

“The festival was just as lively, no, even more lively than I imagined. I also received this from everyone...”

A plate was on Alfina's table with all of the shops' prided cuisine crammed on top of it. It was like a deluxe one-plate lunch. Or, I guess at this scale, it was more like a dinner. I felt like they put too much of their gratitude into it. The serving size really was grandiose. It wasn't as elegant as the full course banquet in the auditorium, but this was far more suitable for a student festival.

“I'm the one who must thank you. You were the one at the center of the entire Food Court. All I did was sit here in this tent.”

“That’s not true. You served a major role to us, Princess Alfina. If not for you, the Food Court would never have gotten so lively.”

I went on to explain the marketing plan this time around to Alfina. She listened to me intently, full of interest in learning new things, throwing in appropriate responses here and there.

“Above all else, what allowed the members of the Food Court to do their business with peace of mind was their trust in your presence here, Princess Alfina. Though it’s somewhat rude of me to say, you are something like this plate. The plate itself cannot be eaten, but it’s indispensable for the one-plate lunch. Just as this plate supports the food, you were here to support our Food Court and allow our members to do business.”

Just like the white plate, she was slender, didn’t waver, didn’t yield to showy claims, and gave off a modest white shine. It was an ideal analogy of her public characteristics. Small wonder nobody was worried.

“I feel quite proud of myself for you to say that, Ricardo.”

Alfina smiled in a truly happy manner. She was like a little sister being praised by her brother. However, her expression immediately clouded over.

“But... I feel like, just as before, you didn’t really get much recompense. You were even excluded from the rankings.”

“I did manage to get everything I wanted, more or less. Let’s see... As long as you’re capable of properly explaining the state of the courtyard to Her Grace the Archduchess, that will be more than sufficient.”

It would surely serve as a stimulus for selling our stocks at a high price. I could without a doubt claim that I was the one who profited the most from the Academy Festival. I might have even made too much of a profit.

“I do concur regarding the work Her Highness has put in, but is it not disrespectful to make it sound like you were simply using her?”

Alicia’s wary words stabbed me right in the heart.

“Shia,” Alfina rebuked her maid lightly.

She did have a point, though. If she could learn just a bit of Alicia’s wariness,

Alfina would...

That can wait. First is something from me.

“Then, it’s a little strange to offer this in exchange, but allow me to answer the question you had during our lesson some time ago, about my goal in doing business. Let’s step outside for a moment.”

I invited Alfina out of the tent. The Food Court members, companies who dealt in all manner of different goods, were gathered together in the courtyard.

“I want to spread such a place throughout the entire Kingdom.”

To take many different companies, combine all their particular specialties, and give birth to new merchandise, just like we did to make our customers so happy in the afternoon. That would eventually give birth to a great expansion of economic scale. And as the world grew from that, it would give birth to even newer products.

A marketplace with just a little more freedom would become the catalyst to accelerate the evolution of the ecosystem known as economics. If I were to give that enterprise a name, it would be a general trading company.

“I think of money as a means to create and sustain such a system.”

Profit is not the purpose of business, but rather, the test of its validity. This was a claim argued by Peter Drucker.

“So this is your goal... It truly is just like you... A large and wonderful dream...”

Setting aside wonderful, it really was large. This girl was really quite wise. *I don’t think I said too much, but...*

“Please keep this a secret from Her Grace.”

And just as I regained my sense of self-preservation...

“Excuse me, Your Highness. A message came from the cathedral.”

Louisa returned together with Claudia. The Oracle Princess’s aide spoke without minding the out of place commoner next to her.

“So the crystal has shown light they believe to be an omen...”

Alfina glanced at the courtyard once more. The members who noticed her

waved to us, and she waved back.

“I wanted to watch over things until the very end, but unfortunately, I must go back.”

Alfina left and headed towards the cathedral. She prioritized her official duties over her school duties. That was the obvious thing to do. That’s why I made a sour expression as I saw her off, not because she couldn’t participate in the festival until the end.

The servants from the archduchess’s residence began cleaning up the tent, so I took the Food Court’s plate and left. The sky suddenly darkened. As I looked up, a cloud was passing in front of the round and silver light of the moon.

“It’s fine if it ends with just an omen. But if not... It’ll be quite troublesome. What do you think, Weinder?”

Claudia and Alicia followed Alfina off school grounds, while Louisa stayed behind and stood beside me.

“We’ve made preparations. But they’re still just preparations.”

Fulsig’s antenna was created precisely for this reason, so that we could build a solid foundation for measuring ley lines. I was convinced this was important, but it was hard to claim that there would be a direct relation. Besides, what Louisa was getting at likely wasn’t related in the slightest to such a theory.

“There’s already gossip going around. In the case that the next prophecy points to a monster flood, the Second Chivalric Order should be given the opportunity, they say. Or that in the case that a monster flood occurs in both the east and west at the same time, the Third Chivalric Order should be strengthened, they say...”

This was information from within the royal palace that I personally didn’t really want to know about. *You do know this isn’t something you should be telling a commoner, right?*

But that was exactly the point. The problem was no longer just about the “prophecy of disaster.” The fact that nobody acknowledged the worth of the Oracle Princess’s words last time was a stressful situation, but simple enough to handle. The one major problem that came from it could be managed and

organized in my little brain. But that wasn't going to fly the second time around.

The prophecy of disaster was already dyed in politics. According to Louisa, they were already discussing who would deal with it in a quarrel over the succession of the throne, in complete disregard of the prophecy potentially being more dangerous than last time.

I looked up at the sky.

What if we need enough power to cast that cloud out of the sky? There's no way to reach it... No, problems that I can't solve aren't meant to be solved. That's basic ideology. The best I can do is solve the most efficient problem that can be resolved in that situation.

Of course, the major premise for all this was that the Weinders needed to become more powerful themselves. That was our goal for this Academy Festival.

Furthermore, using the trust and funds we would gain from Euphylia's investment, we planned to take a debt from the Kendalls. With that, I would be able to secure the bare minimum amount of freedom and funds to accomplish what it was that I wanted to do. However, it would still take several years for this to bear fruit.

"Oh my, has Her Highness left already? Oh, Miss Morland. Our children are much obliged to you for your help over the course of the festival."

A schoolgirl came over from the auditorium with quick strides. It was Maria. She apparently came by to give her thanks to the princess for taking care of Lilka and the others.

The daughter of the Culinary Guild's second-ranking gold company may have managed to "keep" just enough power to oppose the Carlests with what happened over the course of the festival. I was going to need her to do her best to bear the full brunt of the Carlests' strongest obstructions. That was my ulterior motive in helping them this time.

However, that wasn't reliable enough, thinking of what was to come. *If they don't at least take the seat of guild representative... Nope, let's stop there, no point in thinking about an unsolvable problem.*

“Weinder... That’s a rather ominous look you have.”

“O-Oh, sorry...”

Wait, hang on... Is it really unsolvable? It’s problematic for the Carlests to wield such power. Are we the only ones thinking that? Is it only Euphylia and the other western regions who are troubled by the Archduke of the East taking control of the Culinary Guild? They’re not.

I thought back to the condition of the two student council members I saw earlier.

“Maria. It seems the Kendalls will be able to make it through the preliminary elections, right?”

“What’s this all of a sudden? Yes, we managed to gather a considerable number of ballots from the independent companies and the former Dreyfan companies. We won’t be able to win against the Carlests, but our conclusion is that we’ll fill out the regulated ballots to become a candidate.”

Maria looked at me with a puzzled expression.

“But any more than that seems unreasonable...” I said.

“Didn’t you say so yourself? We can’t win if we make it a confrontation between the east and west,” Maria replied.

Just for argument’s sake. Really, just on the off-chance, for argument’s sake... Say I convinced Euphylia to recommend the Kendalls together with Duke Aleberg. They would get two votes, while the Carlests would get two votes from the Archduke of the East and the prime minister. That would make it a tie.

“Considering the current balance of power, my aunt and Duke Aleberg won’t be able to win against the Archduke of the East, though,” Louisa said.

Not only would they not win, it would only aggravate the confrontation between the east and west even further. In the worst case, it could turn into a full-on conflict over the succession of the throne.

That was a state of affairs nobody wanted. It wasn’t like I had any feelings of wanting to give some prince I’d only met that one time the throne, either.

If it were going to end up a confrontation between the east and west,

Euphylia wouldn't endorse the Kendalls. Even if she did, it would be Duke Aleberg who would choose to withdraw.

"So the problem that has to be solved right now is, how do we get the Kendalls to win the election without provoking a confrontation between the east and west..."

I could define the problem. Now then, is this really unsolvable?

"What are you saying? If such a thing were possible..." Maria looked troubled, and Louisa shook her head.

They're right, normally that'd be unthinkable. The powerful Carlests were backed by the powerful Archduke of the East. They were completely capable of winning fair and square. However, something about this was caught on my mind. The information I gathered during the Academy Festival was whispering something to me.

The Academy was a microcosm of the Kingdom. The human relations in the student council, the peak of the Academy, reflected the state of the royal palace to a certain extent. For example, the president was Archduke Kurtheight's daughter, and the vice president was the prime minister's grandson. And during this incident, I discovered that their relationship wasn't solid.

I recalled the state of affairs between the president and vice president of the student council. Both Hilda and Leonardo's parents belonged to the second prince's faction. They were both from families of grand nobles.

Hilda was the second prince's fiancée. Leonardo was the grandson of the prime minister, who was the second prince's boss in the office. Both of them were nobles of the east, their territories were close to each other, and it seemed the economic connection between them was quite strong. At a glance, there were no problems between them.

Was it just their personalities that didn't mesh together? Hilda brought her vanity out to the very fore, but Leonardo gave off a very serious and business-like vibe. The two had poor compatibility.

But at that level, they should have been prioritizing the relationship of their

families. At any rate, it was not the seat of the guild representative that was on the line to them, but who the next king would be.

The prime minister was the one to propose the disarmament of the military. It was only natural that he would prefer the second prince from a political standpoint as well.

But something was still bothering me...

“Miss Morland, could you tell me about the factions the nobles who came to greet Princess Alfina during the Academy Festival belonged to?”

“Yes, it’s like I said before. Probably due to President Hilda’s intentions, people gathered to greet her regardless of their relations to the east or west on the first day.”

“There were those who were neutral, or perhaps part of the eastern faction who aren’t particularly close to Archduke Kurtheight or the prime minister, right?”

As I said that, Louisa looked somewhat puzzled as she searched her memories. The result was just as I expected.

“I understand what you’re trying to say, but this level of discord exists in any faction.”

That was the point. There were no perfect factions. That was nothing more than what they wanted others to think. The moment they had seen the appearance of a common enemy, the (fictitious) third prince’s faction, the two of them ended up cooperating.

Just one more thrust. Where’s the crux of this problem? I have the clue I need. It’s the culprit who attacked Plura.

“Maria. Could you tell me a little more about the former Dreyfan companies who were forcefully absorbed by the Carlests?”

“Yes, I don’t mind, but...”

All that’s left is Jacob and Remy’s knowledge. If my read on this is right, the situation with the guards is driving a wedge in the second prince’s faction. I recalled the image of the old man seated directly beneath the king during the

Spring Festival.

“I don’t have any airtight proof, so I can’t say this for sure. It’s likely just a small possibility, but I’ll just ask you anyway. Do the Kendalls have any interest in winning the final election for the seat of guild representative?”

It was far too insolent a question, coming from the heir of a mere copper company, but Maria gulped, then slowly nodded.

“What should we do?”

“First, please begin by spreading rumors that the Kendalls are endorsing the promotion of the Weinders to a silver company.”

Interlude 3: Investment Negotiations

A man and woman sat across from each other over a table in a small drawing room on the second floor of a luxurious mansion, illuminated by the setting sun. There were two pieces of paper set down between them. A middle-aged butler stood behind Euphylia, and her distant relative, the daughter of Viscount Morland, Louisa, sat by her side.

Standing next to the table was a man dressed in a monochrome suit carrying a valuable looking bag. He was a financial official of the Archduchess's residence.

Even while surrounded by people far above his social standing, the man sitting across from her fluidly ran his pen across the paper and signed his name. Euphylia nodded, and the financial official placed the heavy bag atop the table.

"With this, the investment is settled."

"So, you finally managed to palm off this piece of paper for gold."

Paul didn't show any signs of paying the archduchess's sarcasm any mind as he confirmed the contents of the bag. The heavy bag was filled with metal glittering in the setting sun. It was enough money for a company of his size to expand multiple times over.

"Oh, yes, how goes the election for the guild representative?"

Paul changed the topic as if simply gossiping about a popular matter.

"Does it interest you?"

"Even without voting rights, we're still more or less a part of the Culinary Guild."

"You certainly have a penchant for spouting nonsense. Aren't there rumors of your status being raised to a silver company going around?"

"They are nothing more than that — rumors. That's still far and away for our company."

The archduchess put down her fan and took the contract, the stock

certificate, in her hands once more.

“The details state that the stockholder is to be given some merchandise as a reception gift.”

“Yes. It is for the purpose of cultivating a better understanding of our company’s merchandise,” Paul replied in a frivolous tone.

Euphylia looked to Louisa.

“Mr. Ricardo Weinder said that he wanted us to come at a certain date and time, at a certain place, to pick it up. Also...” Louisa relayed the words her underclassman at the Academy told her.

“Even if the prime minister supports the second prince, it doesn’t mean... I see. Tell him that we agree.”

Now holding partial ownership of the Weinder Company, the grand noble picked up and closed her fan. She then placed it against her brow, and lightly shook her head.

“Being a stockholder can be quite a troublesome matter, can it not?”

Chapter 19: Stockholder's Reception Gift

The midday sun poured down on the smooth stone paving. The main street had numerous houses running along it, each with their own garden. The carriages filled with boxes, running down the road with a pleasant clatter, were truly a splendor to behold.

This was the upper-class district of the capital, where the wealthiest commoners lived. The ones taking up residence here were the merchants in silver companies and above. The only artisans with their homes in this district were basically just at the very top of each guild. The shabbiness of our old covered carriage really stood out.

"You need to keep up a bit more of a dignified act, boss."

Jacob was sitting next to me, handling the reins. *That's right, it's been decided that I'm also going to be living in this district. That's the script, anyway.*

"You over there, stop."

Oh, and here comes a kind gentleman to give a warning to the commoner who doesn't know his place. Two men in matching green uniforms approached us. They had an X-shaped mark on their chests, signifying that they were entrusted with the authority to keep the peace in the city. They both had long metal batons with leather grips. It seemed like the X mark was using two of these batons as its motif.

These were guards of the upper-class district. They were members of the same organization who was charged with protecting the school gate during the Academy Festival.

"What business does a copper have here?" the man on the right asked in an overbearing tone.

Apparently, they saw the mark on our carriage. It was a stylization of a jar of honey. Incidentally, it was also marked with the circle indicating we were an official member of the guild, a silver company.

"We're here to supply the goods for one of our customer's orders. Umm, if

I'm right, then this should be the eighth district..."

I pointed at the map in my hands, right around the Kendalls' main headquarters, and the two guards exchanged looks.

"I see. You just need to go around the road down there to get to the eighth district. Go that way until you see the sign for a tavern, then turn around the corner."

The guard used his baton to point towards a road running a different direction from the main road we were going down.

"Is that so? Umm, but the map I got from our customer says..."

I looked down the main road and cocked my head to the side.

"What's that? And here we are kindly giving you directions..."

The man who called us out in an overbearing tone struck the ground with his baton.

"Now, hang on. It's hardly surprising that a copper would be unfamiliar with the place, right? It'll become really crowded down that way. Not only that, but some big shot's gonna be passing through here today. Right?" the other guard said to his partner.

"Oh yeah, it'll be tough to get by going that way... Mhm, so you're better off going around, since it'll be faster that way. You get me?"

"I see. Thank you very much for informing me."

I politely bowed to them and Jacob handed over a small pouch. The guards verified its weight and sneered.

There is one coin in there that you can't really use in the city, but please just ignore it.

*

We turned the corner that the kind guards directed us to, and came upon a gloomy backstreet. It was just wide enough for a single carriage to get through. And with the now-boisterous sound of the carriage wheels reaching my ears, I slid back into the carriage's cargo area.

“What do you think?” I asked the orange-haired girl within the cargo area.

This was my classmate, who came along as a liaison to the Kendalls. She went out of her way to be here on site herself. The district that I had been dazzled by earlier was also her birthplace.

“There’s no mistaking it. Even we don’t normally come to this area three blocks off the main street. If you’re unlucky, it’s more dangerous than the copper district.”

I see, so this is the boundary region between the copper and silver districts. The boundary wasn’t affiliated with either mercantile class, and ended up as a vacant space in between the two. It was perfect for the activities of certain individuals.

“From the central street, to the main street, right into a back street. How do I put it...? They’re pretty good.”

This was actually the second time we were called out by guards.

“This isn’t the time to be admiring them,” the girl with a red ponytail cradling her knees in the carriage said.

She was dressed like a commoner, but there was something out of place at her waist over her apron. She took a careful peek through the canvas and kept a watch on the outside. Once in a while, she would glance over next to me.

“Ah!”

Perhaps having run over a stone, the carriage shook greatly, and the slender girl next to me unintentionally let out her voice.

“Are you alright, Princess Alfina?”

“Y-Yes,” the platinum-haired girl replied as she readjusted herself.

She was dressed like an employee of ours, so it might have been better for me to call her Fina, but if I did, both Claudia and Lilka would have given me a painful look.

“There was no need for you to come along so far with us, Princess Alfina. It would have been fine to simply wait over there...”

“No. With this, we’ll be able to settle things quickly.”

Alfina raised her arm, revealing a silver bracelet with a red crystal in it. The other side was certainly a lot more prepared than we thought they’d be. The ability to get in touch quickly was quite important.

*

“Boss. Things are finally getting real shady,” Jacob said from the driver’s seat.

I opened the canopy and took a look for myself. On our right, there was nothing but walls. The only open space was a vacant lot further ahead. There was a path back towards the main street to our left, but there was a carriage stopped there as if to block the light of day.

There wasn’t a single person walking down the street. It was clearly unnatural for the midday rush, even for a back street like this.

“The vacant lot over there is the most ideal site, huh?”

“To them too.”

Just as I exchanged nods with Jacob, five shadows showed up in front of us.

“There’s more of them coming from behind as well.”

I turned around as Claudia pointed that out, and spotted another five shadows. With this, we were surrounded. The only way out was the path back to the main street. Three men then came out of the carriage that was stopped there. They were carrying a large box out of the carriage. It looked like they were just unloading their cargo, but it was clear as day they were just obstructing the path.

“If you will, Princess Alfina.”

Alfina touched her bracelet, and the red crystal shined ever so slightly, though Claudia covered her eyes from it.

“They sent a lot more personnel than we thought, didn’t they? We’ll need to buy as much time as we can.”

Jacob took a look at the hoodlums approaching us from the front and back as he pulled the carriage into the vacant lot.

Two men stayed on the path on each side to keep watch, while the remaining six headed towards the lot. What looked like the leader in the middle of the pack pulled out a short sword. The men at his sides were holding what looked like clubs. They went to encircle us with perfect timing.

This was a terrific representation of the term “a trapped rat.” To them, and those backing them, we were surely nothing more than harmful rodents after their grain.

“They really are former soldiers,” Jacob said as he stepped down from the carriage, and I stepped down and stood next to him as well.

Soldiers who lost their jobs during the disarmament of the military mostly ended up going down one of two paths. The first was to become a guard. And the other path, well...

There were, of course, also people left who served as a connection between those two.

“U-Um, what’s going on...?” I said in a fearful voice.

“We’re here to collect the toll, you get me?”

“This is a shopping district of the capital. The guards will come running over right away.”

“Well, wouldn’t that be nice?”

They were awfully composed. Here they were on a hunt, having cornered their prey while their safety was guaranteed. They truly looked like they were having fun.

Even though our conditions were the same, I couldn’t say I was in an equally festive mood. *I guess I really can’t cast aside my senses from my previous life.*

I looked to Jacob to confirm whether he could win, and he shook his head.

“... A toll, is it? Umm, will this be enough?”

I took a jar from the cargo area of the carriage and placed it in front of them.

One of the men drew nearer and opened the lid of the jar, and then kicked it over. The broken fragments of the jar went flying into the air.

“Hey, what’re you wasting the spoils for? Honey can bring in quite the fortune, you know...? Huh? It’s empty? The hell are you planning?”

The jar was empty, but the jar itself wasn’t free either. Also, this man had a scar on his left arm, matching the physical description of the man who attacked Plura. *Let’s have him pay me back fully for everything he’s spoiled.*

“Weinder.”

“Ricardo.”

“You can’t do this, get back in the carriage, quickly.”

The canopy of the carriage opened, and three girls showed their faces.

“Phew, well, ain’t that quite the sight. I didn’t expect this among a copper’s cargo. Let’s take them along as a little side benefit.”

The hooligans began raising the tension. I understood where they were coming from, but it’d be better for them if they didn’t go adding more to their sins. These hoodlums, who thought they’d cornered a rat, weren’t my targets.

“Like moths to the flame, huh?”

“Huh? The hell are you going on about?”

“I’m just telling you, you’ve already been checkmated.”

Just as I said that, a large carriage came in from the main street towards the halted carriage and their unloaded cargo. An employee from somewhere or other hopped out of the stopped carriage to block the way. They looked like they were trying to obstruct the sudden intruder, but upon seeing the four men accompanying the carriage, they shrank back in fear and made way. Shortly after, along with the crack of a whip from a cavalryman, they began clearing their own barricade.

“Wh-What’s going on? Nobody’s supposed to be coming this way.”

The hoodlums’ boss was shaken. He probably never thought his perfect siege, created with the help of the city guards, would be broken. Not that I could really fault him for that.

And as he stood there dumbfounded, the luxurious carriage approached,

surrounded by horse-mounted escorts on all sides. The carriage came to a stop, sandwiching the hoodlums between them and us, as a lady holding a fan came out along with an old butler. She then pointed at the broken jar fragments on the ground with her fan.

“What’s going on here? My property has been damaged.”

You’re not wrong, being a stockholder and all, but can you not put it that way? This is, at most, the company’s property. You’re a partial owner of said company. Partial.

“I came to receive your tribute.”

“It’s not a tribute, it’s a stockholder’s reception gift.”

I took out the one jar in the carriage that was actually filled with honey.

“Impossible... The Archduchess of the West’s carriage...? N-No way, is that really...?”

The hoodlums looked at the lady who stood near the top of the pyramid of the entire country and the cavalymen accompanying her, losing all their fighting spirit. They didn’t even try to pull the clichéd move of using the girls as hostages. I had a backup plan prepared for that possibility via Claudia, though.

The carriage that was blocking the path managed to get away properly. All that was left was for them to escape down the route that we were expecting them to use. This was the most important part of this plan.

*

Back on the capital’s central street.

A young man wearing glasses and an old man sat within a carriage parked on the road. The old man was staring at the movements of the guards patrolling the streets outside. To him, this was his prided policy which managed to protect the public safety of the capital using as small a budget as possible.

But a portion of said guards, and quite a few of them at that, were forming up in front of a certain path without moving at all. A single carriage then came racing out of said path.

“Grandfather.”

The young man in glasses wearing the uniform of the Royal Academy called out to the old man.

“...It seems we’ll have to cast them aside... Both for the stability of the capital, and for Prince Delnicius.”

The old man nodded back to his grandson, then signaled the driver. The carriage, adorned with the crest of a duke, began moving towards the last stop on the central road, the royal palace.

Chapter 20: Central Garden

“Not only is the Academy Festival over, even the summer break is over. What do they want now?”

I was headed over to the lab at Mia’s request. To be more specific, it was Lilka who brought me here through Mia. I opened the door, and found a repeat of the scene I saw before the festival. Dargan, Plura, Ruston, and Shirley. With the three of us, all the members of the temporary Food Court Firm were present once more.

Or not... There were two unrelated people standing against the wall. They were surely quite busy with the affairs of their household, so what were they doing here?

“And what exactly is this gathering for?”

“It’s simple. We made all these great connections during the festival. Ain’t no way we can let all that go to waste, now can we?” Dargan said as he folded his arms.

“So... Does that make me an associate member?”

I appealed to the fact that I was a copper, and my other upperclassman combed through his long hair and shrugged his shoulders.

“That won’t do. The Kendalls will be in the majority like that.”

I see, that’s not a bad idea. As students, we had a relative sense of freedom to spend some time cooperating together here in the school. And we had quite the diverse members too.

“So can we assume you’ll be participating too, Weinder?” Lilka asked.

And just as I was about to nod...

“There’s a company here that didn’t do business in the courtyard, though.”

I looked at the two upperclassmen standing by the wall.

“How cold of you. Didn’t we fight side by side during the guild representative election?” Maria replied.

“I don’t recall going through such a joint struggle. Oh, and congratulations on your unofficial appointment as the guild representative. So, why is it that the two children of such a busy gold company are present here, at a gathering between such small companies as ours?”

Wasn’t Plura just going on about the Kendalls getting a majority?

“We have no intention of participating. We’re simply here to hand over what you requested.”

Jean waved around a scrap of paper he pulled from his pocket. I could see tightly packed numbers written all over it.

“That’s what I asked for in exchange for helping with the preliminary election, right?”

I stretched out my hand, but Jean snatched away the paper right before I could reach it.

“And one more thing. I’d like you to disclose the secret to your little trick. What kind of magic did you pull off to have the Kendalls win the final election at the royal palace?” Jean said with narrowed eyes. “By approaching the independent companies and former Dreyfan companies that were in despair over the Carlests’ actions, we managed to secure our spot as a candidate. We also managed to secure the referral of Duke Aleberg. Everything up until this point was exactly according to the plan you told us at the beginning. Well, I’ve got a whole lot I want to say regarding that in itself, but let’s set it aside for now. The problem is what happened next. Even though we went so far, it shouldn’t have been possible to win the election at the royal palace. However, here’s the reality we find ourselves in. The Kendalls have become the guild representative. The president of the Carlests retired, and his business was transferred to their branch families. Much of his influence in the capital has crumbled to bits.”

Jean went on to speak of the major incident in the business world that had the Academy kicking up a fuss lately.

“We did everything just as you told us. But could you tell us how you managed to get the prime minister on our side?” Maria asked.

This was apparently how things went down during the endorsement meeting at the royal palace. It started with Duke Aleberg declaring his support for one of the two guild representative candidates, the Kendalls. And following this, the prime minister abstained from voting.

In other words, the Carlests already had no way of winning at this point. The prime minister abstained, Duke Aleberg supported the Kendalls, and there were only two other votes. If Archduke Kurtheight were to endorse the Carlests, then Archduchess Euphylia would simply endorse the Kendalls.

Archduke Kurtheight pressed the prime minister for answers as to what he was doing, but apparently, he was silenced after having something whispered into his ear. This was, of course, information about the misappropriation of the city guards by the Carlests.

As a result, neither Archduke voiced an opinion, and Duke Aleberg's recommendation went through without any objections.

"To put it simply, Prime Minister Duke Grinicius is a supporter of the second prince. He's not necessarily part of the Archduke of the East's faction. Actually, from the prime minister's perspective, it wouldn't be all that attractive a proposition to have the Archduke of the East grow too powerful."

I walked over to the slate board and drew a simple diagram of the current political climate of the Kingdom. An archduke in the east and west, a duke in the center, and another duke in the east. I then wrote down the guild representatives they endorsed.

The Blacksmith, Carpentry, and Carriage Guilds were, in a manner of speaking, secondary industries, all aligned with the Archduke of the East. The Caravan Guild, which linked together transportation across the entire Kingdom, was under the prime minister's sponsorship.

And then there was the vacant seat of the largest mercantile guild in the country, the Culinary Guild.

"If everything ends with the Kendalls winning under Duke Aleberg's endorsement, causing them to have no relation to the east or west, then the system will be the same as when the Dreyfans were the representative. With the largest of the guilds being neutral, they can just barely maintain the

balance. That is something very desirable to the prime minister. I saw a fair number of gaps between President Hilda and Vice President Leonardo during the Academy Festival, and came to my conclusion based on that.”

“...You certainly have a point. I can understand what you’re getting at. But even so, I thought the prime minister had no choice but to ally himself with the east...”

“That would normally be the case. That’s why we let those rumors out. The first was about the Kendalls recommending the promotion of the Weinders to a silver company. The second was of us supplying the Kendalls with honey. We then confirmed that the Carlests put the guards in action in response to this, and acted as bait.”

When Lilka came to contact me that day, it was to confirm that the Carlests were definitely on the move.

“That I can also understand. Carlest’s children failed tremendously during the Academy Festival, so he was looking for a sacrifice to secure his ballots during the guild representative elections, and had someone attack the company the Kendalls were endorsing. It would become a silent form of pressure on the other companies. The Weinders are nothing more than a copper, so nothing major would come of it.”

“Indeed, that’s why he played his usual hand. However, it just goes to show that someone might always be watching. At that time, Duke Grinicius was actually on the central street, and thus witnessed the fleeing Carlest carriage and the guards acting suspiciously to cover for it. Now then, the prime minister is the one responsible for pushing for the disarmament of the military. He’s the key figure behind the transition of excess soldiers to an organization of guards to ensure the public safety of the capital. Even though it’s been quite some time since he enacted this policy, given the matter is of such personal interest to him, how exactly do you think he would have perceived the misappropriation of the guards by the Carlests?”

“I see, so the Carlests went too far. However, the guilds are the sponsors for the guards of the upperclass district. They’ll have an influence over them to a certain extent, no matter what. That by itself isn’t enough to...”

“That’s where the distribution of the other guild representatives comes in. The Archduke of the East holds a major influence, due to many of the guilds being in his pocket. The upperclass district serves as a boundary between the nobles and the masses; it’s a shopping district which stations many of the guards. You could even say it’s the very center of the capital.”

I drew a simple diagram of the capital’s districts, and pointed towards the upperclass district.

“So, Archduke Kurtheight could basically form a private army in the center of the capital on a scale that can’t possibly be ignored. Is that what you mean? And that was a line that the prime minister couldn’t possibly allow him to cross.”

“I don’t actually know if the Carriage, Carpentry, or Blacksmith Guild showed similar movements or not, but there’s almost no need for us to investigate it. That’s why the danger of such a future could be so clearly seen by him, I suppose. The over-eagerness of the Carlests during this incident simply led them to their own self-destruction. You lucked out,” I said as I shrugged my shoulders.

No matter how powerful a group looked, there was always a gap within them. All I did was poke that gap ever so slightly with a tiny needle.

Silence fell over the room. Dargan and Plura had completely frozen up. Even Ruston was wide-eyed in shock. And Lilka was gently stroking Shirley’s back, who was clinging to her the whole time.

“...I see. The Academy certainly is a microcosm of the Kingdom itself. Especially when it comes to the relationships between major merchants and nobles. So you’re saying you used the Academy Festival to influence the political decisions of the entire Kingdom?” Jean asked in a somewhat angry tone.

“I’m telling you that it was fundamentally just the Carlests self-destructing. The prime minister supports the second prince, just as he did before. The Archduke of the East didn’t want to take the risk of making it a confrontation between the east and west. Suspicions of being the mastermind behind the misappropriation of the guards isn’t something to be laughed at, after all.

Everything will work out one way or another once the second prince succeeds the throne, so that was far more important to the both of them. Even the Kendalls are desperately hoping it'll come to that, right?"

So, isn't that enough of this topic? My explanation came to an end.

"Understood. I'll be sure that we don't make an enemy of the Weinders even after we become the representative."

After Jean came to that conclusion, he handed over my reward, and I passed it over to Mia.

"Actually, I guess even without that, I wouldn't have you as my enemy. Considering these new circumstances, that is."

Just as Mia and I began confirming the numbers, Jean said something strange.

"What do you mean?"

"Are you not aware of your current position?" Jean held out his hand to Lilka and the others. "Listen. We certainly did manage to avoid provoking a conflict between the east and the west while securing the seat of guild representative. However, this fact is definitely not amusing for Archduke Kurtheight, and Duke Aleberg's position is too weak to oppose him. Having said that, if we were to publicly seek the patronage of Archduchess Berthold, the prime minister would become our enemy as well. Everything is just as your analysis said."

"Right? I'm sure it will be difficult for the Kendalls to act in that situation, but if you just follow—"

Just as I was about to suggest that they should do their best to follow in Dreyfan's example, Jean stopped me by pointing his finger at me.

"However, there's still the matter of you. Not only do you have a strong connection to the Archduchess of the West, she's even investing in the Weinder Company. And at the same time, you're connected to three silver companies under the Kendall umbrella. Do you get what I'm saying?"

Jean went over to the diagram I so proudly used to unravel the influential forces of the Kingdom and wrote the name of a small company alongside the names of archdukes, dukes, and guild representatives.

Oh, yup. Now I can see a picture I really didn't want to know about.

"In short, a connection has been tied behind closed doors between the Culinary Guild's representative and Archduchess Berthold. A so-called mastermind behind the Culinary Guild, if you will. And that's you, Ricardo Weinder."

Are you crazy? Like I could possibly put up with such a complicated position. Leave politics to the politicians. You're the new guild representative, so maintain the balance between the east and west on your own. And just as I was about to begin rambling, Mia silently showed me the results of her calculations.

"...So it's even more than we expected..."

A chill ran down my spine from seeing those numbers. To the Kingdom, they were results worth celebrating over. However, I couldn't possibly be happy about it.

Due to the growth of economics as a whole throughout the Kingdom, they would gain even more power just by squatting on it. Thinking of it from that perspective, I had no other choice but to take a step forward, just in case.

"I'd rather not be made out for some sort of mastermind, but I look forward to working with you, Mr. Representative of the Culinary Guild."

"Of course. Um... What shall we call this gathering?"

"The meeting was given birth due to a gathering in the courtyard, so how about the Central Garden?" Maria suggested.

I tried to say I hated it, since it sounded too much like the name of some secret organization, but Lilka and Shirley agreed with her idea. Dargan and Plura both strained a smile, but neither of them were against it. Ruston, of course, was simply silent.

"Then once more, Weinder, best regards from here on out, Mr. Representative of the Central Garden."

"...Let's have the representative of the Central Garden cycle out every month."

There was still one mystery that hadn't been solved.

The Carlests colluded with the guards to do all manner of overbearing things. There was no mistaking that. They tended towards such behavior by nature. But even so...

What reason did they have to go so far when they already knew they would win without doing so...?

*

In a city full of boorish-looking stone buildings in the middle of a basin surrounded by mountains, just a little distance from the city center, lay a circular tower which gave off a feeling of the history of the region.

Even though it was late at night, one of the rooms within was overflowing with light. Several women wearing white robes were busily working away within. Among them was one that could be called just a girl, and she stepped forth in front of the experimental sample they had prepared.

What looked like a white pelt was nailed down by its four corners on a level plank. The girl placed her hand atop its surface, not paying any mind to its texture. A pale red light poured out from her hand, and a pattern showed up atop the white pelt. It looked somewhat like a mix of a net and a vortex, and the girl stared intently at it.

One portion of the mana's flow is interrupted. It's either damage done to the sample, or simple deterioration... But considering this monster's ecology... There is, for example, the possibility that it can't operate independently...

"Your Highness. My apologies for interrupting your research."

The researcher's thoughts were brought to an end by one of her subordinates who just entered the room. The girl then lowered the hood of her robes, liberating her light-violet hair into the air with a flutter.

"How unfortunate. I was just starting to get a picture of it. So? What brings you here?"

Her disappointed expression swiftly changed to that of a dignitary doing her duty.

"It's concerning the recent visit to the Kingdom by—"

The girl snatched the report out of her subordinate's hand.

"...What? So that idiot Dagobahd got rejected by the princess? He's all bark and no bite, I see."

Even as she said that, the girl's clever gaze scanned over the detailed report. And then, as if suddenly losing interest in it, she tossed the report on her desk.

"...Putting together the reports from Dagobahd, Vilar, and that man from the Kingdom, it seems there's no need to make any major changes to the plan's general framework."

"Indeed. Prince Dagobahd returned in all haste, and was asking about the state of affairs of the Despair Mountains."

"Oh, yes. It's about time for Theta to start looking for prey..."

The girl pulled out another piece of paper. It was a report from the observatory located at the very top of the tower. A massive ley line that humanity could never set foot within ran next to this country. There were two thick circles drawn on the map in her hand. These indicated the movement paths of two lumps of mana. The fact that they could see them so clearly from such a distance meant that the specimens in question possessed a tremendous amount of mana.

"It's just as we expected. We should have Dagobahd... Wait."

"Your Highness?"

"It's not just Theta... Beta's patrol path is also changing."

The specimen that posed a larger threat was beginning to wander towards the river.

"There shouldn't be any ley lines capable of supporting its activities over there... No, wait a minute... They've also shown signs of instability in their ley lines, which means... Inform Dagobahd of these results. It may be interesting to have him spend a little more time in the Kingdom."

"As you wish, Your Highness."

The girl looked out the eastern window as her subordinate left. She could see a mountain range far off in the distance. A purple mist rising out of the

mountain range like a heat haze was reflected in her golden eyes.

“I wonder if I could make more progress with my research if I went over there...?”

Side Story: The Knight's Secret Circumstances

My red ponytail hung over the nape of my neck as I knelt on the ground, looking at the shadow of my head cast against the carpet. My hair cast a rectangular shadow across my neck from left to right, as if it were a sword meant to decapitate me. The sheathed sword at my side felt ever so far away.

“That is quite a selfish request you’re making.”

So said the blonde noble before me, casually waving her closed fan in the air. Archduchess Berthold’s words caused my cheeks to run hot. I couldn’t say anything back. All I could do was bring my feverish face closer to the carpet.

Yes... Back then, I distanced myself from the princess. I distanced myself from her in her greatest time of hopelessness in her role as the Oracle Princess.

It wasn’t what I wanted. I returned to my family home to ask my father about monster floods at the princess’s request, and was ordered to confinement. An order from the head of the family was absolute to a daughter of nobility.

Precisely because my father was so stern, I didn’t remonstrate him for not wanting to defy His Majesty’s will. I found myself quite cold for thinking so, but didn’t resist his order.

I was secretly quite relieved when I heard that the princess went to Berthold to take a rest. Once that came to an end, I would ask my father to return to her side; that’s what I had decided.

However, by the time I returned to the capital, it was all over. I was left standing completely dumbfounded as I watched the Third Chivalric Order leave the western gate to deal with the disaster. The unthinkable was to happen: a

monster flood in the west. A single misstep in handling it would have been a calamity that shook the entire nation, and the princess prevented it from happening.

In short, I wasn't able to do anything. A knight who didn't make it in time to reach the battlefield surely had no worth.

And despite that, the princess told me, "I asked something unreasonable of you." How could I even look her in the eyes anymore?

"No matter the conditions or punishment, I shall subject myself to your will. I know full well that I am overreaching for a mere aide. But even so, please, I beg of you."

However, I still couldn't possibly afford to withdraw. The princess's surroundings were going to become turbulent precisely because she had accomplished a great feat. That was something even I could understand, despite being fairly ignorant of politics.

Moreover, that man was now close to her. I recalled the scene of the celebration after the monster flood's suppression.

Of all things, he served as the princess's first dance partner. It was said that this was the idea of the princess's new aide, Louisa. What exactly was she thinking? Even the princess's guardian, the archduchess herself, apparently approved of it. In other words, I was the only one who recognized the potential danger that man posed.

"What do you think, Louisa?"

"I do believe she has a point. As the one managing Her Highness's public relations, I do think there is a need for a guard at her side. We also cannot put our trust into a new guard trying to approach her at such a time. Having her return despite having run away previously may be better than that."

Louisa looked at me with a meaningful gaze. I unintentionally put strength into my hand that was placed on the carpet.

"However, there is one problem..."

Louisa whispered something into the archduchess's ear. And obstructed by

her now spread out fan, I couldn't hear any of it.

"You certainly have a point... Very well. Then let us ask Ricardo for his opinion regarding the approval of your reinstatement. We'll make a decision following that."

"That can't be!"

My head reflexively shot up at the outrageous outcome. However, the two women before me were simply nodding as if it were a perfectly natural decision.

*

I swung my sword in the garden of a mansion in the capital. I could feel my sweat fly into the air. My tied back hair swayed violently like the tail of a horse.

Under normal circumstances, this would bring peace to my heart. However, right now...

"To have! That sort! Of man! Control! Who this! Sword! Is dedicated to?!?!?"

I slashed my sword at the invisible commoner before me, and a certain memory was brought back to me. The anxiety in my heart brought my arms to a stop. I looked at the tip of my sword, pointed at the ground, and muttered to myself.

"...There's no way he'll approve..."

That was because I thrust my sword at him before. Back when I saw him alone in the library's archive with the princess, my hands drew my blade on reflex. There was in fact another schoolgirl together with them, but she was still that man's employee. She couldn't be trusted.

I can at least admit to his sheer audacity as a mere merchant to immediately step in front of the princess, though...

"No... Isn't he just taking advantage of the princess's kindness more and more lately? She's even been going to that man's shop, of all things. I've heard he's gone as far as making her pretend to be a servant."

The princess's maid, Alicia, bore the same wariness towards that man as I. The story I had heard from her only stimulated my panic.

“If it’s come to this... Do I bow down and yield to that man, even if only just this once...?”

Just what will he demand of me? A bribe? Or depending on the circumstances, something far more wicked...?

I almost dropped my sword, and just managed to maintain my stance. *No, a knight’s pride could never allow for such behavior.*

*

I hid myself like some manner of rogue in the filthy back-alleys of the lower-class district, looking at a somewhat dirty little shop before me.

The princess came out of the shop together with that man. They were talking about something by the door. The smile she pointed towards him just made him become more and more conceited.

And of all things to happen, the princess bowed to him. My hand reached for my sword on reflex.

It was already inevitable. *If bowing my head is all it will take, then I’ll do it. I’ll show that I can endure a moment’s humiliation, or even more than that. I’ll charge into that shop first thing tomorrow morning.*

*

The day after I made my resolve, I was summoned by the archduchess.

She spread out her fan and casually waved it about, as my nervousness and anxiety tormented me.

“It seems that Alfina asked Ricardo about your reinstatement.”

My spine froze. Once more, I was made to know the shame of a warrior who didn’t make it in time for a battle.

“According to Ricardo...”

Just as I was about to scream, “Please wait a moment! Just give me a little more time!” the archduchess’s shoulders sank back.

“He said that it would be a relief to have you by Alfina’s side.”

“Wha—?!”

I was at a complete loss for words. *What did she just say? It would be a relief? Me?*

“It seems that little girl from the east is thinking up some manner of ruse, using the management of the Academy Festival as a pretext. Not only that, you are also able to attend the Academy... What’s with that befuddled look? Was your wish not just granted?”

I was only able to process about half of what she said. I looked up at the archduchess, still completely stiffened up.

“I’m sure she’s just surprised at how easily she was forgiven.”

“Well, even when he was dealing with me, he only ever looked at me as a target for negotiation. He surely didn’t even recognize Claudia as an enemy...”

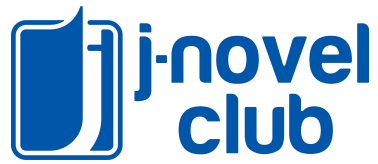
“If I’m not mistaken, he even easily rejected talks of becoming my husband too.”

The archduchess and Louisa began laughing.

I don’t get it. All I’m able to understand is that he’s outrageously abnormal. He definitely cannot be underestimated.

In that case, there was only one path I could take as a knight. Now that I had been forgiven by Her Grace, I returned my sword to my waist and made my resolve.

I shall dedicate my entire body and soul to judging whether he is suitable to serving the princess during the Academy Festival. And if I determine him to be an evil influence... I shall take care of the princess, even if both he and I must fall.



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The Economics of Prophecy: Volume 2

by Norafukurou

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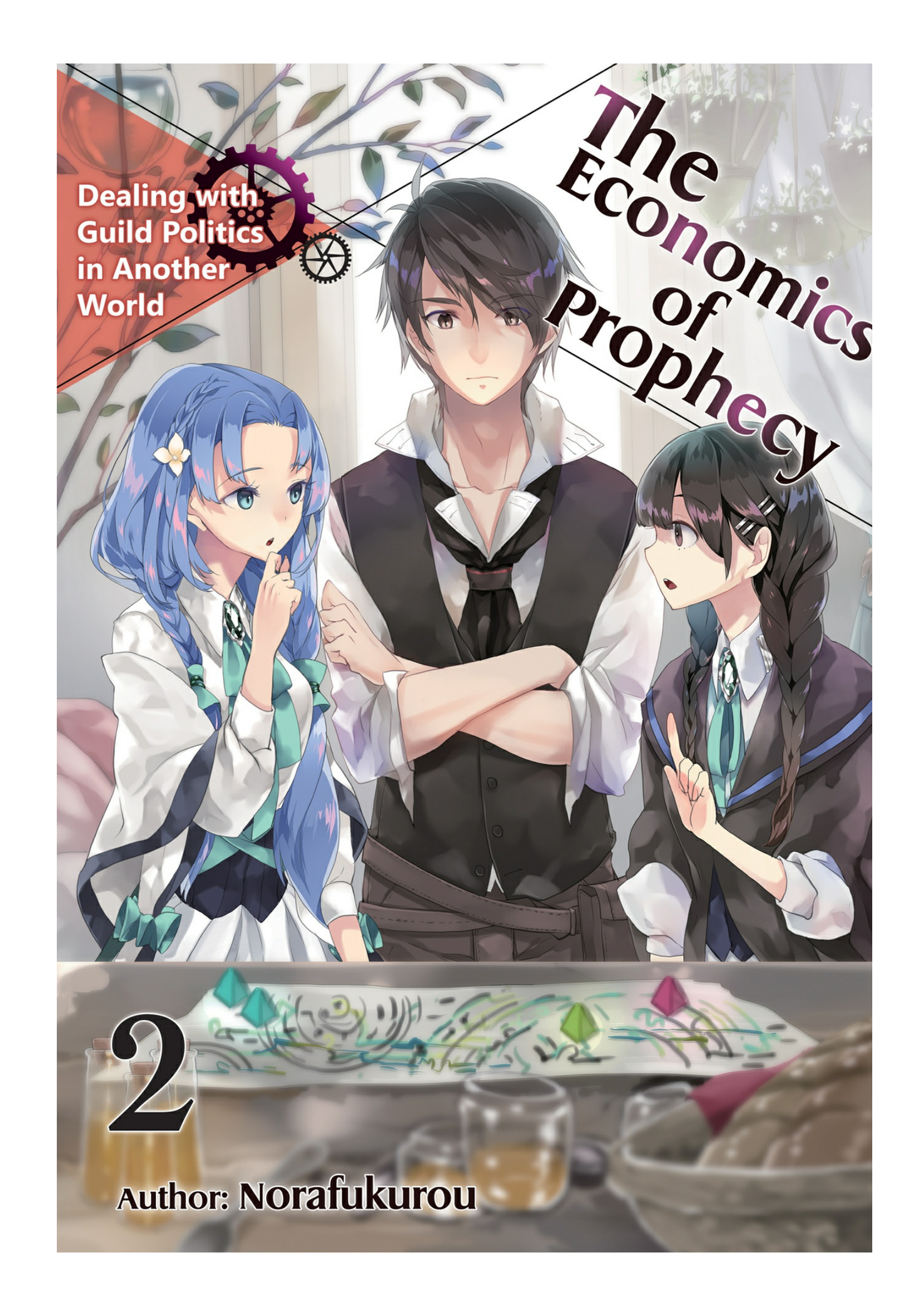
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The Economics of Prophecy

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